魔法科高校の劣等生 14

古都内乱編〈上〉

The irregular at magic high school

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司波達也 しば・たつや
司波兄妹の兄。国立魔法大学付属第一高校2年E組所属。『ガーディアン』として守るべき存在、深雪について以外は全て達観している。

司波深雪 しば・みゆき
2年A組。達也の妹。昨年主席入学した優等生。冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する『重度のブラコン』。

四葉真夜（よつば・まや）
四葉家の現当主。達也の叔母。『極東の魔王』『夜の女王』の異名を持つ魔法師。
最凶最悪の魔法兵器たる司波達也を陰から操る、
当代最強の魔法師。その真の狙いとは――
魔法科高校の劣等生14
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Chapter 1

[Kyuuchouji (Kyuuchou Temple)], where Kokonoe Yakumo served as the head priest, lay on top of a small hill at Fuchuu City, Old Metro Tokyo. As a devoted temple for volunteer *physical work*, word among the temple staff was that it was probably a [link to ascetic practice] -- close to the neighbourhood, it had fitted into the regional community as an indispensable part to the town scenery.

And as an extra, when the townspeople had a chance to look at old map details, they were in for a surprise. It didn't matter if old meant a hundred years old, they were looking at genuine maps.

They learned that there was no temple from the start.

They learned that there was no hill at such a place.

During the later period of the twenty years of repeated world wars, the capital defense forces were deployed to the Choufuu, Fuchuu, Mitaka, and Musashino districts, with Choufuu Air Field serving as their base. And following the rules of troop deployment, the civilians in these areas had been evacuated for almost ten years. The hill Kyuuchouji stood on was formed from the earth dug up when a large underground defense bunker was constructed on its spot.

While it was regretful that the capital sustained damages during the war, thanks to the [Musashino AA fortress], the old capital ward escaped unscathed. On the other hand, the defense position bore the brunt of the attacks from multiple attackers, but that meant the civilian evacuation did not go to waste.

And so it was unavoidable for the blank that occurred between the town and its residents. The people returned to their own [residences] because the war had ended. And later the government spent money to reconstruct the town. Although it wouldn't be completely the same as before.

After a total sealing, without any dismantling of the underground defense bunker, and the accompanying town replanning, the number of families that were unable to return to their former residences was reduced. And the quick installation of an advanced transportation system gave the town scenery a somewhat futuristic look.

What was added was not only overhead tracks where small-scale compact train-type public transportation facilities [Cabinets] ran through. Apart from those new features, traditional features and various facilities large and small were added to the town scenery. A [large temple on top of a small hill], Kyuuchouji, was one of them.

The temple had a history that was somewhat, no, considerably delicate to say. The previous priest, in short Yakumo's master, was compensated for cooperating with the Ninth Magician Dev't Research Institute, and obtained the residence and facility to train disciples -- disciples in [Shinobi], rather than disciples in Buddhist priesthood.

And for that reason, the façade of Kyuuchouji was aimed for camouflage and was intentionally constructed in the old style. Even the grounds inside the fencing were in a 20th century style.

In contrast, the training facility was dug deep, deep down into the earth and its area, even wider than the grounds above it, was fortified with the latest technology. Not only was it a training ground for ancient magic, at present it was even a training ground at the highest level for modern magic.

Kazama introducing Tatsuya to Yakumo was more than to introduce the latter to this underground facility. As a master of taijutsu, Yakumo's skill was top-rank. However Kazama's expectations were not only to aim for Tatsuya's taijutsu improvement. He did not bring Tatsuya into the military in order to be a *usual* close-combat specialist. He was expecting, to the very end, the abilities of an extremely powerful magician that could fight on the frontlines.

It was a facility where both taijutsu coaching and magic training were possible. As soon as he knew that Tatsuya's house was within an agreeably short distance from Kyuuchouji in the neighbouring town, this temple was Kazama's only choice.

And now, Tatsuya was entering into the lowest level of Kyuuchouji's underground training facility. This training room had, from the floor to the ceiling and even the walls, three layers comprising of 10cm thick concrete, 30cm thick lead, and 60cm thick of neutron shielding concrete.

This was no nuclear shelter, it was meant as a training room for magic. And as to why such secure anti-radiation shielding was required, there was a reason behind it within the history of how 21st century magic was developed.

Research and development on modern magic originated in AD 1999, in an incident when an American police officer used an unusual power (at that time it was still called ESP) to take down nuclear terrorism. From those events onwards, R&D on modern magic started out as a means to counter nuclear threats; basically the primary objectives were the control and suppression of nuclear fission, and the isolation and nullification of radiation.

With focused research on it being worthwhile, it was at a stage where it was safe to say that neutron barriers and gamma radiation filters were completed. Nevertheless,

even today the development and improvement of spells against nuclear reactions was essential data captured in magic ability development.

Even so, what Tatsuya was about to do in this room was neither practice for radiation isolation magic nor improving nuclear fission control magic. In some ways, it was the opposite.

This underground training room was currently turning into a pool. Even so, it was not being flooded for swimming purposes. With his shoulders just out of the water, Tatsuya was in short-sleeved training wear holding a pistol-shaped CAD in one hand. Though he wasn't swimming, both his head and hair were drenched.

What his right hand was gripping was not his favorite Silver Horn Custom. It was clear from its plain appearance that it was a prototype. The biggest difference was the bayonet-like object attached to the muzzle end of the barrel. An imitation, because it was neither sharp nor pointed, and only because the metallic thick plate was constructed to be like a bayonet.

With his right hand underwater, Tatsuya pulled the trigger. The *two* activation sequences that generated underwater were absorbed into his right arm. The first one was output from the pistol-shaped CAD. The other one was output from the bayonet-like attachment.

The magic sequences acted on the attachment. Water bubbled at the tip of the CAD. The groans that escaped from Tatsuya's clenched teeth grew louder and he went down on his knees. His right hand hideously burned deep red due to the severe scalding, Tatsuya ended up dropping the CAD due to the injury.

Submerged up to the top of his head, he immediately went up to standing position. His hair being drenched was because of this being repeated. Often with ragged breaths, he would raise his right hand to eye level and repeatedly clench it open and closed. There were no remnants of scalding due to the use of [Restoration], but the semi-conscious action was due to the immediately uncomfortable feeling that he might suffer intense damage.

With his right hand finally regaining its sensation, he stretched it out underwater. Its fingers latched on the CAD which had floated up. Even the bayonet-like attachment, which was burned off from the tip when it was submerged at that time, was back to its old form due to [Restoration].

Tatsuya then again prepared his CAD underwater. However, a commanding voice with no one around and nothing close to his ears softly echoed.

["Tatsuya-kun, it's almost midnight."]

With an air-vibrating spell -- its activation was different yet its contents were the same as those activation sequences from USNA STARS Planet-class magician Sylvia Mercury Faust -- Yakumo whispered from outside into Tatsuya.

"..... Understood."

Tatsuya's reply was spoken in the same manner as before but Yakumo understood what was picked out from Tatsuya's voice using his spell.

Sure enough, as soon as Tatsuya made clear that his training was over, the water in the room began to recede. As he waited for the water to recede, Tatsuya used emission-type magic to shake off the moisture from his hair, skin, and clothes.

His casting didn't aim for a totally dry state. As soon as he dried his clothes enough so normal movement wouldn't be a problem, he used gravity-type magic to flick the door switch on the other side of the room. Due to the nature of the training room, no electrical equipment could be installed inside the walls.

("An inaccessible room if magic weren't used ...")

As he ruminated once more on the fact that came only now, Tatsuya started on the ladder that would bring him back to surface --- for Yakumo had cut the electrical power to the elevator.

◊ ◊ ◊

September 23 2096, Sunday. Even though he had returned home the night before, just before a date-changing midnight, Tatsuya still started out this morning very early for morning training. That made Miyuki, who was checking the unread messages on the home server, a bit worried for an early-rising Tatsuya.

He was not a brother who would stop upon being told not to overexert himself. No, resorting to persuasion by tears might *for a bit* get him to listen to what she said, but perhaps even that would only be temporary. And she had just used that weapon last month.

"I'll hold on to sympathetic tactics for a little longer until it's time for serious need." Miyuki resignedly thought.

In the kitchen Minami had already started preparing breakfast. Lately Miyuki and Minami got surprisingly cooperative together, and changed the rules about who

prepared what meal. From the start, with the development of home automation, since there was no preparing meals by hand unless for special events, the appearance of struggling in the kitchen looked hilarious from a third person view -- that was what the two of them belatedly noticed.

And so Miyuki left the kitchen work to Minami as she headed for the bathroom.

She then controlled the HAR in the dressing room, taking out Tatsuya's clothes -- underwear included, but Miyuki was not into being bashful.

In truth, it had been in her third year of middle school that she had had thoughts on whether it was good being bashful like a maiden in situations where she was in front of male underwear even though it belonged to her beloved brother. Although, when she imagined herself being red-cheeked in front of her brother's underwear, she changed her mind thinking [this is for degenerates rather than maidens]. --- If another person saw her expressing her delightful smile as she was hard at work preparing the shower for her brother, he would have thought she was beyond help in various ways. But perhaps he would never meet Miyuki herself face-to-face and tell her that.

Having prepared for her brother's prompt return, Miyuki's last task was to place the towel as it was--- in other words hold the towel in her hands --- and head at a hurried pace for the entryway. She was not into unladylike behavior like running inside the house. Even if she wasn't seen by her brother, Miyuki didn't have the guts to behave in a way her brother deemed unsuitable.

Due to door biometrics, the sound of the door being unlocked echoed to both kitchen and living room. By the time Minami had stopped watching her cooking and came out of the kitchen, Miyuki was already standing by in the entryway.

"Welcome back, Onii-sama."

"I'm home."

"... Welcome back, Tatsuya-niisama."

The slight delay was due to the time Minami took to rush from the kitchen to the entryway. She was out of the kitchen at the same time of the unlocking, but for this morning Miyuki still ended up in a big lead over her. When she first came to this house Minami couldn't hide her disdain over this, but nowadays she had all but given up.

And that was the proper response. They may not be in the middle of combat, but it was strange for Miyuki to correctly ascertain Tatsuya's presence even when he was

still over 50 meters away. Minami not putting up an astonished expression would be earning the praises instead.

"Onii-sama, the shower has been prepared for you."

"Thank you."

Miyuki followed behind her brother, who had taken the towel and entered the bathroom, with a truly happy smiling face. On seeing her, Minami exhaled secretly. Even for a live-in maid, this level of letting off steam should have been permitted.

It was Sunday and yet due to circumstances already mentioned, mornings at the Shibas proceeded according to the ever usual timetable. That meant a comfortable teatime after breakfast. And for Miyuki, who had given in to Minami over preparing breakfast, preparing Tatsuya's tea was something she didn't turn over. For Minami's part, she would be studying and, to avoid taking damage from the sickly-sweet atmosphere, was assigned the task of cleaning and laundry.

Her ever-usual wholeheartedly prepared coffee earning the [words of praise] from Tatsuya and finally settling down, Miyuki then,

"Onii-sama, I would like to ask you about something."

suddenly made up her mind and tried asking Tatsuya on one thing that had been clawing at her mind for quite a while.

"What?"

It was blunt, but Tatsuya's voice towards his younger sister was gentle all the same. Encouraged, Miyuki threw away the last of her hesitations.

"Why is Onii-sama not entered into this year's Thesis Competition? I'm aware that the solar furnace experiment performed last April at the school grounds was exempted from submitting a screening thesis which was required for Magic Engineering students, it does mean it wasn't prohibited from participating, was it?"

"Come now, don't say it wasn't out just for nothing."

The idea of prohibited from participating was strange, Tatsuya smiled as he shook his head.

"Then why ... ?"

"It's because I don't have the time."

Tatsuya's answer to Miyuki's short follow-up question was just as short, and was precise unlike Miyuki's inquiry.

"Was it ... related to the magic that Onii-sama is practicing every day until late at night?"

Miyuki hesitatingly followed up with a question. She was at a loss whether or not it was okay for her to intrude further,

"That's right. You understood it well."

Tatsuya's hand reached out towards Miyuki's head who was beside him. Along with his commending words, Tatsuya softly stroked his younger sister's hair. Such gentle sensation led the hesitation remaining in Miyuki's heart to melt away.

"Was it perhaps what is Onii-sama making efforts for is not practicing magic, but development of a new kind of magic?"

"As expected of my Miyuki, she really knows what I'm doing."

Those words were embarrassing to Miyuki even more than his hand touching her hair, although she knew that most of it was flattery, or rather in jest.

Tatsuya wouldn't have to subject himself to such hardship if it were training for an existing magic. The virtual magic calculation area that was planted in him may have such low magic output, but more than copying entire magic sequences and then using it, it can *completely* identify the structure of the magic sequences no matter the magic and what status it may be just before activation. From there on it was a problem of throughput. If it was magic he could activate he could use it without any training, if it was not then no matter the training he could not use it. And with his *eyesight* and analytic skills, there was no magic spell that he could not analyze.

Whatever was troubling him at this time until late every night, there was no way that was an existing magic.

"I've started development of this magic since March. That may be the case, it took me some time even though I clarified the theories from the onset. It was finally in June that I managed to clear the magic spell design phase."

And so I wasn't into the Thesis Competition at all, Tatsuya smiled. However, Miyuki wasn't smiling at what she heard. First off, the fact was that her brother, the theoretician [Silver] of the mysterious genius magic engineer Taurus Silver, took three months just to work out the theories. Another thing was the development start, which was March.

"Then the new magic Onii-sama was dealing with now ... was it meant for the confrontation with Lina?"

"You understood it well."

The answer that came out from Tatsuya had the same words, but its nuance was surprisingly different. This time it had both real surprise and admiration. Tatsuya really felt admiration at Miyuki for figuring out an almost correct answer with those hints only.

"The magic I'm developing now is a magic sequence for a close-range direct attack that uses the FAE theory."

"FAE ... theory? If I remember right, that was the theory used behind Lina's weapon, wasn't it?"

"Yes, the magic theory that was the foundation for what Lina used, the strategic-class wielded magic weapon [Brionac]. ... FAE, that's Free After Execution."

The strong emotions that were put into Tatsuya's tone were either respect towards the engineer who completed the ersatz divine weapon Brionac ... or antagonism. It was felt by Miyuki, not which of the one, but in that it could be both of them.

"The resulting generated phenomenon that was manipulated by magic was a phenomenon that was essentially not part of this world, so immediately after the manipulation the shackles due to the laws of physics were weakened. And so during the short time lag until the normal laws of physics take effect, one can execute the next magic with an amount of power far smaller than the required interference power to do normal phenomenon manipulation. That's how the hypothesis goes."

And thereupon Tatsuya noticed his own mistake, and shook his head as he smiled bitterly.

"No, it's not a hypothesis. It was already demonstrated by Brionac that the FAE theory is correct."

"Onii-sama, pardon me. There's something about what you've discussed now that I don't understand, can you clarify it for me?"

Miyuki's question was not mere socializing, it was a chance to clear up her doubt due to her love of learning. If it were a mere difficult theory, she would have probably swept it off by giving her brother annoying thoughts. But the FAE was a theory connected to magic used by Lina. Miyuki couldn't bring herself to remain ignorant of that.

"Go ahead, no need to restrain yourself."

"As long as it is not a single-process magic, magic is constructed using consecutive processes. With that many, the succeeding process will take over and take effect on the state of the event manipulation of the previous process. However, for such magic, I have no actual experience in easily activating the second process onward, isn't this a counter-example to the FAE theory?"

"I see ....."

On hearing Miyuki's question, Tatsuya, his head as if struck at a blind spot, nodded.

"That kind of misunderstanding is probably common among magicians."

However that was an unexpectedly strong emotion he felt, not because it was unexpected that what Miyuki pointed out was correct, but because even proficient magicians on the level of Miyuki would misunderstand something like that.

"Misunderstanding, you said?"

"The fact is that magic processes by themselves are not magic."

At Tatsuya's short explanation, Miyuki expressed confusion.

Of course Tatsuya intended to keep on explaining until her younger sister got it.

"Take this magic for example"

As he said that, Tatsuya opened the sugar pot lid, made a sugar cube float to his eye level and held it there, then a second later he returned it back to the pot.

"Onii-sama ... that may be seasoning, but you're aware how I feel on wasting food."

"Oh, yeah, sorry."

And, upon seeing Miyuki rebuking him for what she saw, he was stuck with doing an apology without any excuses.

Miyuki smiled satisfactorily at her brother meekly apologizing.

"Well then,"

Experiencing the discomforting young-and-old rank reversal, Tatsuya slightly forced the discussion back on track.

"There's no need to say it to you, but the magic just used was the popular basic training spell [Suspension]. A magic comprising of four processes -- a gravitation-type anti-gravity magic process to make the sugar cube float, a movement-type rest magic process to suspend the sugar cube mid-air, a gravitation-type gravity control magic process to slowly lower the sugar cube into the sugar pot, and a movement-type rest magic process to make the sugar cube stay still inside the sugar pot without impacting it. However this presentation, now that you've said it, would easily foment misunderstanding."

"Where have I made a misunderstanding?"

"I didn't say you made a misunderstanding. It's just that for the four processes of the magic, the delusion that each of them is an independent magic rises."

"That was ... a delusion?"

Tatsuya nodded gravely at Miyuki, who was currently bewildered upon being told that unexpected fact.

"Suspension is a four-process magic, but it's those four processes that it becomes a single magic. To reach the stage where the magic is activated one has to complete constructing the magic sequences until the final rest process and define the variables. Without the full magic power to cover the four processes,"

Tatsuya broke off there and his eyes gazed into Miyuki, as if ascertaining her comprehension.

"The magic wouldn't be interrupted during activation, the anti-gravity process wouldn't activate from the start."

Miyuki expressed a surprised look.

"That's right ... if each process were independent magic, the moment the magic power is insufficient the magic would have been cut-off mid-way ... and not the result when it would have been non-activated from the start."

Muttering as if talking to herself, Miyuki was at that moment digesting eagerly what Tatsuya had taught her.

"Magic processes are by themselves not independent magic. They are, through and through, part of one magic. That's what you mean, isn't it Onii-sama."

"Exactly as you've said it. That's my Miyuki, you sure learn fast."

Smiled upon by Tatsuya, Miyuki turned her eyes away bashfully. It was an expression of pure and simple embarrassment, but this time the feeling of embarrassment because she was unable to comprehend something until she was taught this much was stronger.

Tatsuya was not praising her out of sarcasm, he was really commending her. Miyuki was ashamed of herself who was aware of that and yet, while she's *her brother's* younger sister, all the more unable to understand this much.

Although, she probably thought that she always mustn't turn her face away. Miyuki faced Tatsuya with a forced smile.

"Now now, something like this would end up being *intuitively* misunderstood without practically any personal experience, no matter how much of the theory you've understood. Magic is not a scholarly pursuit, but a technical capability. Without any experience in failing to activate magic, we wouldn't be troubled over its reasons."

Tatsuya wasn't sharp at other people's emotions, but it's a different story towards Miyuki. Whether it's seeing Miyuki go into a slump, or quickly going around with a cover-up.

"Besides the important point is not the reason why magic failed to activate, it's the fact that magic processes are only nothing more than convenient objects. As per what modern magic scheme had taken form, from activation sequence to magic sequence construction, to successfully describe the activation sequence it's only convenient that the magic sequence be broken down into modules called processes."

Then again, Miyuki is not the type who doesn't know she's being encouraged on by her brother. Tatsuya was concerned *about her*. Glad about that, her forced smile softened up somewhat.

"I finally understood what Onii-sama was talking about."

Miyuki lightly poked her own head, and she expressed a pleasant [Sorry, for being a dunce of a younger sister] smile. As that expression would cause one to experience large gaps with the usual images of an all-too-orderly beauty bringing about even the coldness, Tatsuya released power enough to totally get rid of his awareness towards ostrich-ism.

"Magic processes are through and through part of magic. Therefore event manipulation due to magic goes through all processes and is singular. Since even completing one process is still nothing more than a mid-stage event manipulation

the manipulated event won't be successful, the event manipulation difficulty lowering described by the FAE theory wouldn't occur, right?"

"... That's right. Full marks for you, Miyuki."

Even Tatsuya had his senses taken away by his younger sister charmingly swinging slightly her head onto one side. He tried to cover it up by pretending to be unnaturally silent, as if scrutinizing Miyuki's answer, but he had no faith in himself whether or not he can really deceive his younger sister.

Miyuki's smile, that made flowers bloom to their full glory, rejected Tatsuya's prying as something unsophisticated.

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Just how does that pair pass time during a holiday?

For upperclassmen, classmates, and underclassmen who knew to some extent the siblings Tatsuya and Miyuki -- that meant the majority of First High students, it was the first time all of them had encountered this question. And so,

--- They flirt with each other all day long, like a couple in passionate love?

--- No-no, say what you want but to go that far ... at least how about on the level of an all-day date?

--- Nah, that's naive. I'm sure that couple would finally end up in a scene where ...

in those situations a colorful array of speculation (wild ideas?) spread around.

Their speculations were partially spot on. It's true that the pair are *very happily* spending their rest days, even going on dates.

However, it is not every day. In fact Tatsuya many times was away from home on Sundays. It's mostly going to the FLT research labs or being summoned by the Independent Magic-equipped Battalion, but ever since Minami came to the Shiba house, he stopped worrying about Miyuki being alone, and so the frequency of occurrence went up.

But today was right now unusual, for there are no appointments set for Tatsuya. Even Miyuki was not into saying "I want to go out". It wasn't because the student

council elections were moved to weekends; it was covered by the fact that Tatsuya was physically exhausted due to training.

And so to tell the whole story, Miyuki was in no mood to entertain guests today. Even though those guests were close relatives. What's more, she was disinclined to show this pair into the house. Even if the people were close relatives she can't rest easy, even though she knew they're allies she cannot lower her guard.

But those were nothing more than Miyuki's personal sentiments. Moreover their reason was [for her brother] and since Tatsuya didn't show any stance of denying them, Miyuki (on the surface) has no reason not to welcome them.

"Fumiya, Ayako, good for you to come."

"Fumiya-kun, Ayako-chan, welcome."

Tatsuya and Miyuki friendly addressed the pair who had just settled down after being led inside by Minami and offered to sit on the sofa. It was for the above-mentioned reasons that Miyuki's manners were quite diplomatic, while Tatsuya was never to lower his guard whoever he was facing -- apart from one person. But seen from outside the pair's manners showed an impeccably friendly affection.

"Tatsuya-san, Miyuki-oneesama, pardon us for intruding you."

"Tatsuya-niisan, Miyuki-san, long time no see."

In contrast with the greetings of the Shiba siblings, the response of the Kuroba siblings were stiff. Compared to Tatsuya and his sister they should not be considerably inexperienced. Age-wise those June-born twins would have been sixteen, the same age with March-born Miyuki. Whether sixteen years of age was adult age or minor age was set aside for now, and since it was almost ignored the twins should be able to easily and completely hide their nervousness.

In other words, today was perhaps due to business that corresponded to those [considerable matters]. Both Tatsuya and Miyuki drew that conclusion from their appearances.

"Which reminds me Fumiya, Minami was indebted to you for last month."

Minami, standing beside the sofa, quickly bowed to Fumiya who was bewildered at suddenly being thanked by Tatsuya.

"Thanks to you eliminating the guards, you saved me from trouble."

"O, oh ... ... that incident, right?"

On the words for guard elimination, Fumiya gradually realized it was the incident during the last day of the 9SC when he brought down the security surrounding the van Minami was on.

"No, it's not a considerable matter."

Don't mind about it, Fumiya tried to answer this back. However,

"Though this may not repay the favor back to you"

Tatsuya was quick to follow-up his words.

"Is there something I may be able to help you with?"

Fumiya was struck speechless at the unexpected words, while Ayako sitting beside him exhaled loudly.

"... Really, we're no match for Tatsuya-san. With a calm look that shows zero interest in other people's mood, he brought down such a surprise attack at us."

Shaking her head with a look that's raring to say something even though she's stumped, she turned her focus at her younger twin who's frozen beside her.

"Fumiya, let's take up his offer. We're only emissaries from the start, we have no choice about it."

"Y, yes. You're right ..."

Fumiya nodded with a resigned look, then from an inner pocket of his jacket he neatly wore even though it's a Sunday he took out a normal-sized sealed letter.

There was no address. Picking up the sealed envelope then turning it over, Tatsuya lightly raised his brows. Miyuki, peering over from her brother's side, lightly gasped as she placed a hand into her mouth.

Written on the reverse side was the name of their aunt, Yotsuba Maya.

"We're here to personally hand this to you from the mistress."

At Fumiya's words, Miyuki looked beside at her brother. Tatsuya nodded back at Miyuki, accepted the paper knife that was presented by a fast-acting Minami, then broke open the seal.

Inside the envelope was a simple single sheet of stationery. Tatsuya looked it over thoroughly, and when done reading he handed it over to Miyuki who's been waiting patiently.

"Are you aware, Fumiya, of the contents that were written here?"

Fumiya showed some slight hesitation,

"Yes, I'm aware"

And yet answered on his own without asking his sister for help.

"I see"

This time Tatsuya shifted his focus onto Miyuki. Miyuki had just finished reading the stationery, and was softly nodding with the intention to [it's your call].

"That written here is a commission for assistance for the capture of Zhou Gongjin?"

"That too we know."

This time, Tatsuya plainly raised his eyebrows.

"I see. The commission is not a figure of speech, it's meant as it was written."

Both Fumiya and Ayako nodded as one.

Miyuki half-rose to her feet and faced Tatsuya.

"Onii-sama ... why has Aunt offered this [commission] to us?"

The question was is it okay to commission when *ordering it* was enough. Even Tatsuya was of the same opinion on the matter.

"On that matter we were entrusted with a verbal message."

"A verbal message? Is it something that cannot be left even in a letter?"

Secrecy was normally tighter for paper documentation than electronic data. He's wondering just what kind the contents are to make her hesitate to even put it into the letter.

However, Ayako didn't answer directly to that question.

"'It doesn't matter if you refuse this job.'"

"Aunt would say such a thing!?"

Miyuki unintentionally raised her voice, then *faced Tatsuya* and ashamedly muttered [Pardon me].

Tatsuya understood the reasoning that made his younger sister be taken aback. However he was not that much surprised. Maya may be the head of house Yotsuba, but since Tatsuya's status to the Yotsuba was that of a Guardian, Miyuki has the highest authority when it comes to ordering him. And as per the secret agreement arranged between house Yotsuba and 101st Brigade, apart from missions that concern Miyuki's protection, it was decided that the 101st Brigade has the preferential right.

Miyuki was seeing as absolute truth the might of the Yotsuba, or rather since she doesn't know well the competencies of other magic organizations or military powers, she was at a state where she was convinced that she cannot go against Maya's orders. In fact, even Maya cannot ignore the Yotsuba organization and its agreement with the military. With these set regulations, there aren't many cases where Maya can order Tatsuya.

Accordingly, Tatsuya judged that it wasn't time yet to oppose Maya. And that call, just because the opponent had behaved like a lamb, won't change.

"Fumiya, tell Aunt that it is [accepted]."

Both Miyuki and Ayako faced Tatsuya with plainly surprised looks.

"I will certainly pass the word. ... My apologies, Tatsuya-niisan."

And Fumiya faced Tatsuya and bowed very deeply.

"Why is Fumiya apologizing?"

"Capturing Zhou Gongjin was a mission originally given to the Kuroba. And because of our incompetence we ended up causing Tatsuya-niisan trouble ..."

The [incompetence] Fumiya said referred to the circumstances surrounding last month when on Maya's orders the Kuroba sortied to Yokohama Chinatown for Zhou Gongjin's capture. That time the head of house, Mitsugu, was severely injured with one arm completely bitten off, and the dragnet set by the Kuroba hit squad was broken allowing Zhou to escape.

Fumiya's look, when he answered Tatsuya's question, had [shame] written all over it.

"Fumiya, it is not bad to ask for other people's help."

At that state, Tatsuya took on an unexpected brotherly attitude.

"All the more if it is a Kuroba business, you should have actively sought me out even if you suppress your own sentiments."

"Tatsuya-niisan ...?"

"Wanting to accomplish by your own what was entrusted to you is an attitude I can understand. However making the mission succeed is the greater priority."

By their own meant by their own strength, that is to say the manifestation of juvenile perfectionism and an aspect of dangerous obsession common among the youth.

"Failure is not permitted whether it's your or my *work*."

Tatsuya's voice was stern. However, hidden in there is a gentleness that would make Miyuki envious.

"... You're right. It was a verbal gaffe."

Even Fumiya understood that Tatsuya was looking after him without the need to be taught of that by anyone.

"So it's not an apology then, is it. Thank you very much, Tatsuya-niisan."

On seeing Fumiya bowing down again, Tatsuya replied back with a satisfied nod.

"Well then let's hear out what's clear thus far."

"Understood. After escaping Yokohama, Zhou Gongjin headed west by sea, apparently his escape route through the Pacific was blocked. After disembarking at Ise, Zhou was cornered at Biwakooohashi as he was heading north, but he ended up getting away. We believe he has slipped in somewhere in Kyoto. Our men are currently on the move and searching in the Oohara area.

"Any info on the supporters?"

"It's likely that the [Traditionalists], the organization of ancient magicians opposing the houses of [Nine], have had a hand in his escape."

"The traditionalists, eh?"

"Tatsuya-niisan, do you know of them?"

"I've heard a bit of them from Master Yakumo. They're not only a domestic gathering of astray ancient magicians, they have ancient magicians that have fled from the mainland --- and they have even taken in occultists, probably attempting to boost organizational strength. And last time I remember there were refugee occultists within the Kudou, is it possible that they have given a hand?"

"We don't have to worry about that. The occultists under Kudou escaped from the former Ninth Laboratory immediately after Zhou Gongjin's escape from Yokohama and have joined up with the traditionalists. No need to inquire to the Kudou about this, we got direct confirmation from them."

"The fact that the traditionalists and the houses of [Nine] are joining hands behind the scenes is unthinkable. No need to worry about the Kudou stabbing at our backs."

"Tatsuya-san?"

It was Ayako, up to now was leaving the explanation to her younger brother, who was reservedly asking Tatsuya who was staring into mid-space and thinking about something.

"No, pardon me. I'll keep those in mind."

On detecting that those thankful words contain a [question time is over] sign, Ayako and Fumiya stood up as one.

During the time when Tatsuya and Miyuki left to see Ayako and Fumiya off at the entrance, Minami was clearing away the tabletop and prepared additional black tea. Her sorry feelings for jumping the gun on her master (Miyuki) had already disappeared from within her. She has emotions of respect towards her master Miyuki, esteem towards her as a magician, and aspirations towards her as a young girl. At the same time, she's a bit bothered at her master taking up maid duties, and is well aware of her inconveniently severe brother complex.

Returning to the living room with teacups in hand, Minami was motioned to settle herself on the sofa Fumiya had sat on just now. Reluctantly, she lowered the teacups in front of Tatsuya and Miyuki and had just sat down when Tatsuya slightly frowned.

"Err, Tatsuya-sama ... ?"

Minami had internally categorized Tatsuya as one with more common sense than Miyuki. In short, a companion even more sensible than her master. While she wasn't

reacting wildly, Minami was driven to worry whether she had committed some kind of blunder.

"Minami, prepare one more cup of tea."

"Yes ... ?"

She was self-aware that now she might have shown a stupefied expression; Minami's confusion was evident in her face.

(Is there another guest coming right after this time?)

"It's not what you think."

She herself may not have noticed it but Minami's face has not only confusion, even her doubt was showing up.

When he perceived what was on her expression, Tatsuya brought in a correction along with a slightly strained smile.

"I meant that you prepare some for yourself since our conversation might take long."

Minami's doubt cleared up with Tatsuya's explanation, but a new confusion came up at the same time.

Even so Tatsuya saw right through it.

"It's uncomfortable for me and Miyuki having something to drink while you don't have any."

"... ... Please wait for a moment."

As she was beaten down with a not-well-understood sense of defeat, she quickly went back to the kitchen.

As he was waiting for Minami to bring her own cup and return to the sofa, Tatsuya spread out Maya's letter on the table. Only terse business was written on the single sheet of stationery. He used [Elemental Sight] to read the information attached to both stationery and envelope, but there were no traces of special tricks being applied.

"In other words, Aunt's task really appears to be only to help out in the capture of Zhou Gongjin."

Explained on this, a strongly suspicious look showed up on Miyuki's face.

"Why Aunt would only this time choose not an order but a commission?"

"It's true that it bothers me. And unless we ask Aunt we won't know the answer ..."

Tatsuya looked at Miyuki, and then at Minami.

It was no way a severe gaze. Even so, tension ran through Minami's spine.

"Both of you may not be aware of it, but from the start Aunt holds no authority to order me. To put it more concisely, Aunt's command authority has the lowest precedence."

Miyuki and Minami's shock and awe were laid bare. Both of them covering their mouths in unison was perhaps the fruits of their manners education or the result of the maid under her master's influence.

"Needless to be said guaranteeing Miyuki's safety is the highest priority, but the next in priority are duties with Independent Magic-equipped Battalion. Aunt's command authority comes in third after that."

Miyuki stirring beside him was transmitted to Tatsuya, but he didn't give attention any more than that. Even Minami who was focused on Tatsuya's words, didn't gaze coldly as usual at a writhing Miyuki's brother complex reaction.

"However up to now when Aunt has instructed *work* for me, it was always in the form of orders. Perhaps they knew through ways and means that I'm not in a duty, but in any case that was the norm."

Tatsuya then reached for his teacup. Either he was thirsty with all the talking, or perhaps behind his tea drinking he was collecting his thoughts. His returning the cup to its saucer was a bit slower than usual.

"Since a not-too-common method was used, it seems that we have an unusual situation. Such as the case this time when it requires special countermeasures, for example."

Comprehension was in Minami's expression, but worry was showing up in Miyuki's.

"That is, the task this time is especially dangerous, right?"

"We have an opponent who has heavily injured the head of house Kuroba, and is still evading the Yotsuba's pursuit. It's no easy task to capture or to off him."

As he was answering with those, he gently stroked Miyuki's hair as if telling her to "not to worry". On feeling those hands as Tatsuya saying he was not thinking of it as a dangerous mission, Miyuki regained her composure.

"The problem is not the difficulty of the mission."

However, the next thing Tatsuya informed them when he let go of hair-stroking brought tension back to Miyuki and Minami's expressions.

"It's the first time for me in a situation where the target's whereabouts are unknown, and I say it's very rare for the Yotsuba. And I haven't known of one who has the capacity to escape from the Yotsuba's hand."

Tatsuya sighed at the difficulty of the latest task.

"An opponent for such a situation. There's no avoiding that this might turn into a long-term task."

Miyuki's expression turned from tension to worry and loneliness. Upon seeing that Tatsuya hastily added his next words.

"It doesn't mean that I'll be gone for extended periods. There is school, and from the start I have zero know-how on persons search I have to commission other people to locate his whereabouts. My turn will come when Zhou Gongjin is located."

"... Will it turn into a battle?"

"Miyuki, enough with that face. There's no way I'm going against him alone. The task that is requested of me is to cut off all of the target's escape routes."

As he said that Tatsuya pointed at himself.

Miyuki, having understood what that meant, breathed a sigh of relief.

"However from time to time there are days that I have to be away from the house."

Tatsuya pretended that he did not see Miyuki's "that's not what you said" sulked look.

"When that time comes, Minami, you protect her."

Minami didn't understand well why she was made to sit here. As a result, she was so far vaguely listening to Tatsuya's talk with her mood that it was other people's problems.

"Yes--!"

However, that was in some way a surprise attack. Minami, on hearing formally from Tatsuya the tasks that were given to her as a magician and a Guardian, instinctively straightened her back more than that was necessary and ended up answering in a surprised tone.

Tatsuya remained impassive even when hearing her "Yass--!" response.

"Magic strength-wise, Miyuki is stronger than you are. Perhaps she can use many spells in simulated combat. But those have nothing to do with this."

"-- Yes"

Inspired by Tatsuya's serious tone, Minami this time solidly responded back.

"Minami, for the Yotsuba you are Miyuki's Guardian. But for me you're more than that, you're one of the few magicians whom I can put my trust in."

Tatsuya's voice was darkly grave. Tatsuya was aware that Maya was the one who sent in Minami and had some hidden plans for her; likewise Minami was aware that Tatsuya knew. But on top of that, Tatsuya said he trusted Minami. Judging with his own eyes, he said she was trustworthy.

"When I'm out of the house, I entrust Miyuki to you."

"Please leave the rest to me."

Minami squarely accepted that trust.

◊ ◊ ◊

Due to the nature of work of the Kuroba *family*, they have numerous business trips. For that reason, they have regular hotels in every area in Japan. For major cities either a hotel under the direct patronage of the Yotsuba or a hotel with direct Yotsuba funding was set up. Even this time Fumiya and his sister were staying at a hotel set up under the Yotsuba umbrella.

And so they could make calls to the Yotsuba main house without fear of being intercepted.

"The mistress' letter has certainly been handed to Tatsuya-niisan. Moreover we were entrusted with Tatsuya-niisan's verbal message."

Fumiya was reporting what had transpired today to the Yotsuba main house.

["And what did Tatsuya-dono say?"]

The number he was calling was a direct line to Maya, but because of circumstances she unexpectedly could not answer the call, and so he was speaking with Hayama instead. Fumiya didn't mind talking to a butler on the results of the task that was ordered by their mistress since [Hayama-san as the other party was easy on the nerves].

" 'Acknowledged', he said."

["Anything else? Did he say anything indicating about a censure should, for example, the request of Madam be not accepted?"]

"No, he did not say anything of the sort."

["Indeed. Good work Fumiya-dono and Ayako-dono. I will relay to Tatsuya-dono from here on the detailed appointments."]

"I see. A pleasure talking to you."

As Fumiya said that, Hayama respectfully bowed on-screen. With this the call had ended. Fumiya too bowed to him as he cut off the line.

"With this our mission is over, right? This time we were really just mere messengers, weren't we?"

Ayako, who was beside him listening to their call, talked in a flat tone to Fumiya, who took a big breather after finishing his report. On the surface one would think those words would reveal her displeasure on the zero resistance at the mission, but looking at her expression would make one realize that she was very receptive at the fact that the mission was over quickly .

"It's still six in the evening. We can get home early at this time, so what next then?"

Fumiya, who had just sat down, shook his head at Ayako's inquiry.

"Well, we'll go take a rest today. After all the main house took the trouble of preparing for us a luxurious room like this suite of three adjoining rooms."

"So this is the so-called luxurious .... So such petty bourgeois-like stuff meant we're far from Maya-sama's envoys we're not even fit to be Father's envoys."

After lightly rebuking her younger brother's idle talk, Ayako noticed that mixed in with the [idle talk] was a cynical streak, so unusual for her brother.

"Fumiya, are you unhappy with today's task?"

Ayako changed her tone, and took on asking point-blank her younger brother's true intentions.

"I have no complaints on the mission itself."

With a paradoxical expression, Fumiya acknowledged that he had complaints relating to today's mission.

"I know that being an envoy is an important task, and I know also that I'm the person suited for the task of bringing Maya-sama's letter to Tatsuya-niisan. But ..."

"You are not happy with the conditions that were imposed when bringing the letter, are you?"

Ayako supplemented Fumiya's muddled words with her soft voice.

"That's what I'm talking about!"

Fumiya blew his pent up emotions up at Ayako's [sisterly] voice.

"Just what the hell are these, not making a move and not shaking off what is following us!"

That was the restriction, rather than condition, that was imposed upon Fumiya today.

On the onset, during the time he was ordered directly by Maya to [bring this letter to Tatsuya-san], Fumiya has no beef against being sent on an errand; instead he was happy about it. He was simply happy that he was going to see Tatsuya, and was just satisfied being made an intermediary to send out a *request* to Tatsuya who was said to be not on very good terms with Maya (but they appeared to be).

However after Maya had left, on being informed on the above-mentioned restrictions as an important point of today's mission from butler Hanabishi, the Yotsuba's number two servant and in-charge of various arrangements incident to the accepted primary [task], he felt that cold water was doused onto him. It was not that

he was getting unhappy on meeting Tatsuya. What he was harboring was not disappointment, but worry.

"And I know that we're being shadowed and we cannot interfere with it! Thanks to them, it'll end up with us informing some gang from somewhere the residence of Tatsuya-niisan and Miyuki-san!"

"It's all right, Fumiya. Whoever they are, they cannot divulge the link between Tatsuya-san and the Yotsuba. He himself may not be aware of it, but Tatsuya-san's personal data was manipulated such that the more it is investigated the more they will conclude that it has no link with the Yotsuba."

Ayako's consoling words unfortunately had almost no effect to Fumiya now.

"I'm not worried about that! The guys that were tailing us could be the people hiding Zhou Gongjin."

Ayako did not brush off Fumiya's judgement as [over-thinking]. From the time he fled Yokohama, Zhou Gongjin was well-aware that his pursuers were the Kuroba. However, in accordance to their family directive, Fumiya and Ayako went on to deliberately stand themselves out as the Kuroba during last month's 9SC.

"Even though the best case is where Tatsuya-niisan would be bothered due to incompetence from us the Kuroba, due to our action allowing us to be followed, they would end up in someone's cross-hairs. I can't see Tatsuya-niisan face-to-face anymore," Fumiya lamented, face down and in a grim tone.

"Fumiya"

Ayako stood in front of him and called out her younger brother's name.

"What aryu-!?"

Ayako had pulled both ways the cheeks of her brother, who had raised his head up.

"What are you doing!"

Fumiya immediately shook off her sister's hands, but on seeing Ayako quite roughly pulling him, his cheeks reddened. Towards a tearfully protesting younger brother, Ayako had, for an instant, shown a really pleasant-looking sadistic smile, then quickly switched to a kept-up false smile.

"Nee-san?"

In an almost suspicious tone, Fumiya asked for an explanation from his sister.

"You should be relaxing more, Fumiya. It's different when you're stuck with your inattentiveness, but since it's the main house's orders shouldn't you be doing nothing? It's not your mission. It doesn't matter even if they go for Tatsuya-san. Even should they try something meddlesome, it only means we have the enemy by the tail."

"Nee-san ..."

A seated Fumiya stared with upturned eyes back at Ayako who was standing in front of him. From a third person view --- as far as Fumiya himself was concerned he was in something unintentional -- an expression that could only be called cute, but then Ayako wordlessly and forcefully pulled back.

"I should be saying something that might be very appropriate, but I saw exactly a while back that's somewhat interesting."

"W, well Fumiya, it should be nothing of that sort. And oh, we can't return at this rate, I must go fix our luggage."

"But we didn't prepare luggage for a night's stay!"

"Well then, Fumiya, see you at dinnertime."

"Ah, hey, don't run out on me!"

The escape pace quickening all the more when told not to escape was not limited to thieves. Ayako ran into her own room, and clicked it shut before Fumiya could catch up.

◊ ◊ ◊

It was a little over a month before this year's [National Magic High School Thesis Competition]. However, the most discussed topic among the First High students was, still, not the thesis competition.

"This year probably won't have the chaos of last year, right?"

"Told you before it wouldn't occur. And in the first place the election itself is probably unnecessary. Even if , for argument's sake, an opponent stood up, it's still a landslide victory for Shiba-san."

"Shiba-san's that good, eh? I can't wait for the oratorical. Dammit, if only that brother isn't present."

"Don't be stupid. Shiba-san can't have a *boyfriend* because of that elder brother, right? Unlike a performer she cannot be betrayed. She's the best."

-- so went a conversation between second year boys.

"I wonder who Shiba-san places to what position?"

"It's exciting ... no more, isn't it. It's the annual elections, and this year there's especially no one brave enough to stand up to her."

"If that's the case then the first year Saegusa-san will be vice chairman, and Mitsui-san will be treasurer, right?"

"Eh? Onii-san is not given a position?"

"Onii-san ... wait, isn't he a junior?"

"Well, yeah he is. Didn't he impress you as something as an [Onii-san]?"

"If that's the case isn't it 'Onii-sama'? Even I wish for such an [Onii-sama]."

"Right right. Didn't that [Onii-sama] become a treasurer? You know that other people can't hold back Shiba-san?"

"Oh--, just like what happened last year, right ..."

-- so went the conversation between third year girls. Also, gossip similar to those could be heard here and there in the cafeteria. The First High students' current interest gravitated towards the student council president elections coming this weekend.

Most of all, this year was an almost certain vote of confidence with zero opposition.

This year also the general student meeting had no major themes like last year's regulations change in student council member selection criteria. The boys' talk was on Miyuki's charming figure that was bound to be seen on the oratorical, while the girls' talk converged on who would be chosen for what position.

"You're an [Onii-sama] now, Tatsuya-kun."

"It's bad manners to eavesdrop, Erika."

The chitchat also reached the table of Tatsuya, the person concerned. Forget it, it's not only the voices. Though no one was shameless enough to see him openly, Tatsuya's antenna immediately picked out many times the stealthy quick peeks that were headed his way.

Right now there are five at same table: Tatsuya, Erika, Leo, Mizuki, and Mikihiko. Miyuki would have tried too, but it would be troublesome with too many gazes converging on them, so she hesitantly took her lunch at the student council room, along with Honoka and Shizuku. Honoka herself didn't chose her friends over her love, it's that she's avoiding by herself the maelstrom of gazes headed at the person concerned.

"Tatsuya, you're not running for student council president this year?"

"I didn't announce my candidacy last year either."

As Leo's question stepped on last year's poll count, Tatsuya's answer once again stressed that last year's vote count was invalidated. The massive number of invalidated ballots last year was something unspeakable not only to Miyuki, who ended up with a embarrassingly humiliating nickname, but also to Tatsuya.

"Now now, there wouldn't be a racket like last year for this year, right?"

Thinking that provoking Tatsuya too much was untimely, Erika said that to smooth things over.

"I'm sure there's no wise guy who can make fun of Miyuki's speech."

Mikihiko expressed the same opinion in an earnest tone.

"Oh yeah Tatsuya-san, who was chosen by Miyuki-san to take on the new roles?"

Even the other three listened attentively to Mizuki's question, not to mention the others surrounding the table who, all as one, were straining their ears.

"I wasn't told of that. We didn't discuss it much back at home."

Signs of disappointment went along here and there on Tatsuya's direct answer.

"Didn't I tell you that it still hasn't been decided yet? The elections are not yet over, don't rush such stuff."

At the same time in the student council room, Miyuki was saying that in an exasperated tone.

"Honoka, in this situation Miyuki would refuse to yield. Give it up."

"Uh ... I'm sorry, Miyuki, for making such ruckus."

Honoka, already losing her nerve at Miyuki's ill-natured aura, luckily surrendered at her close friend's rebuking.

"... I was a bit harsh on my words. I'm sorry, too, Honoka. I was trying to understand well the reason behind you worrying my Onii-sama's actions."

Miyuki said that as she glanced at Honoka's back.

Honoka, locked on by the Miyuki's gaze, turned around.

Standing there was Pixie, who had just finished preparing the after-meal tea.

"Ugu ..."

Honoka stiffened her expression, but Shizuku patted lightly on her shoulder.

Shizuku showed her shaking head at Honoka who had turned around.

"It's too late, Honoka."

Honoka hung her head, crestfallen.

Azusa, Isori, and Kanon all smiled wryly as they looked sympathetically at a discouraged Honoka.

Izumi and Kasumi looked at each other with a "Hm?" expression.

"Eh? Isn't that Minami-chan?"

"Hm, that's her alright."

Tatsuya spoke in a lightly surprised tone towards a mystified Mizuki and Erika.

"There are times Minami would come to the dining hall with her classmates."

She probably realized that she was being watched. Minami, holding a tray, turned to the group of classmates (probably) at end of the queue and was greeted upon. Tatsuya nodded back at her then turned his focus back to his two female friends.

"Small wonder at that."

"True, true."

The pair laughed deceptively but then,

"Which reminds me, Tatsuya-kun, why aren't you joining the Thesis competition?"

Seeing the situation turn sour, Erika tried to divert into the pressing subject.

Tatsuya was not the one who couldn't read that girl's motives, but facts about Minami were never a subject worth nagging about. Tatsuya *willingly* acquiesced to Erika's request.

"Very simple, it's merely because I have no time for it."

"Eh, what do you mean by that?"

Mikihiko was likely the one who had shown the most interest on this subject. Even now he was especially straining to listen in, indicating that the biggest issue was Tatsuya's answer.

"No matter what and how you put it, it is as what I said."

Tatsuya tried to answer as such to end the discussion, but he quickly changed his mind on seeing the other five's overpowering gazes on him that demanded his explanation.

"After the stellar furnace experiments, I went into an independent study, but it still hasn't reached the stage where I can announce it."

"Oh ... so you're engaged in an extremely advanced study, eh?"

Leo let out a sigh as he nodded deeply. Into it a [tell me what subject is it!] nuance was included but,

"You could say that. But its contents are a secret."

He could not straight out say that he was into development of a combat magic that uses the FAE theory.

"Err---"

And as expected, a displeased voice came out from Erika. However,

"Erika-chan, you shouldn't be saying such nonsense!"

"Erika, I'm sure Tatsuya has some reason for keeping it a secret. First off, even revealing the magic theories the level of the stellar furnace would not even satisfy our curiosity."

Mizuki's words were to rebuke Erika, while Mikihiko's words were aimed at both Erika and Leo.

In short, Mikihiko was saying that [they would not understand at all even with the detailed explanation], but intelligence-wise the pair were never dull. However, it was for that all those reasons that both Erika and Leo did not object at what Mikihiko had pointed out. Both were not stupid enough to know that to be strangely obstinate would only bring trouble upon themselves.

"Speaking of which, Tatsuya-kun, did they request your assistance?"

"They haven't for now."

"This year's front man is Kei-senpai, right? You and Kei-senpai are on good terms."

"Of course I would cooperate if they would tell me so, but it is not my time this year."

Towards Erika's surprise-filled question, Tatsuya answered not with [smiling and dodging], but with a honest manner.

"Eh, why is that?"

This time it was Mizuki, tilting her head to her side and looking doubtful.

"This year's venue will be in Kyoto."

"The thesis competition alternates between Yokohama and Kyoto, but the bias of the evaluation is different by location. They say that when it's held at Yokohama the practical subjects are valued highly, whereas it's the purely theoretical subjects that are preferred in Kyoto."

Tatsuya nodded at Mikihiko's additional explanation.

"In the Kyoto-held competition, presentations related to the theories of magic like the cardinal code hypothesis are easily ranked higher than subjects on activation sequence improvements, power systems that use magic, and magic sequence development for the aforementioned purpose."

Leo finally shook his head many times with a crestfallen expression.

"So they cannot use Tatsuya's expertise if he were to join."

"I thought Tatsuya was far ahead of the high school students even for pure theoretical fields ..."

However Mizuki meekly raised her protest, unable to accept it.

"Yeah, and it isn't that difficult to do."

Erika answered Mizuki's question. Or rather, she directly voiced out what was her own idea.

"?"

"Kei-senpai may not lose his nerve or grow jealous, but when the methodologies are different they would have a hard time even just to mutually reconcile of methods."

"Are they really that different?"

"Now look, I had my CAD carved by Kei-senpai, right? And from time to time, I had Tatsuya run maintenance on it so he knows about it somehow. What do you mean the approach are different when they support on the same spell."

"I see ... carved seal support is closer to our Ancient Magic talismans."

As the friends sidelined the main person and went on their own topic, the afternoon class bell rang.

◊ ◊ ◊

7:30pm. Normally it would be still a time for get-together after dinner. But for today, when the needles point at 7:25pm -- though it's not a classic wall clock but a modern one with a virtual two-needle clock face -- Tatsuya went into his own room. There, using his own room's security-enhanced voice-only telephone, he called a certain lady's private number.

["Hello, this is Fujibayashi."]

The telephone, with its normal vision-phone image processing resources all diverted to encryption, was handling high-grade encryption at a speed that did not interfere with the call.

"This is Shiba. My apologies for calling you this late at night."

He hurriedly ended his time with his *precious* younger sister to make this call at this time, something he had arranged for in an advance e-mail.

["It's rare for you Tatsuya-kun to contact me. What's the matter, you have urgent business?"]

"It is urgent business. Far more important than time."

An uneasy pause came about from the suggestive expression.

["... somehow I don't want to hear it."]

"And I don't want to say it if I could."

["....."]

Fujibayashi's silence urged Tatsuya on.

But although as far as tonight goes, Tatsuya's speaking must be unaffected by any reaction from Fujibayashi.

"I ask for Elder Kudou's cooperation."

And Tatsuya's request smoothly went out, even though he had spoken of the [unspeakable words].

["With Grandfather?"]

"Yes. A request not to Lieutenant Fujibayashi of the 101st Independent Magic Battalion, but as to a daughter of the Fujibayashi and Elder Kudou's granddaughter. And I want you to set a time and place where I can discuss privately with him."

["When you say privately, you mean it's linked to Yotsuba *business*?"]

This time Tatsuya was silent.

["Considering the event last month, I can't say I refuse, can I?"]

"That's right."

Fujibayashi was startled into almost voicing that out. And despite of what he had said himself, Tatsuya's call for cooperation now has that [returning the favor from that time] nuance; she didn't expect him to freely admit it.

It would take her several seconds to spin out her next words.

And so Tatsuya resumed the conversation.

"However I have no intention of speaking out unreasonable demands. I would rather consider for the Elder to kindly oblige a voluntary assistance."

["Can I hear out the *business* at hand?"]

"The location and capture of a certain magician who had escaped from Yokohama Chinatown."

["... I see. Now I know that's the Yotsuba wanting to hire the services of Grandfather."]

A sign that showed that Fujibayashi was letting her nervousness up was sent from the other side of the phone.

"It seems you're aware that the Yotsuba ran into trouble."

It wasn't the Yotsuba that wanted to hire the services of Kudou Retsu but Tatsuya, but he didn't bother to clear Fujibayashi's misunderstanding.

["Truth is the JSDF are having a hard time, too! As Lieutenant Fujibayashi you're more than welcome to set out and deal with this guy."]

She deliberately calling herself [Lieutenant Fujibayashi] was a petty response to Tatsuya's words a while back. Although as far as Tatsuya is concerned this level of wordplay was inadequate for sarcasm.

Even Fujibayashi might have read the mood with the silent response. With uneasy coughing, she attempted to clear it away. What's more, she used her deliberate business-like tone to answer Tatsuya's request.

["Very well, I will ask when it is convenient for Grandfather. Is replying by mail all right with you?"]

"No problem. Just use the Independent Magic Battalion's for the encryption."

With these words, Tatsuya was only saying to keep the security up. However for Fujibayashi this was distrust aimed at her [sender blank mail] the month before last.

["... All right then!"]

Tatsuya was racking his brains just what nerves did he touch at Fujibayashi, who had brusquely cut off the conversation.

With the call over he felt his throat was dry, so Tatsuya went for the dining room.

There, Miyuki was by herself drinking tea.

"Onii-sama, you want something to drink?"

Miyuki, seated in front of the dining table, immediately stood up and asked Tatsuya.

"Sure, I'm a bit thirsty."

Though he answered directly, Tatsuya did not ask for Minami's whereabouts. Studying, cleaning, bathing, whatever, Tatsuya knew from sight that Minami was out from this place, and he too has no tasks for her.

"I will prepare one immediately."

Water was enough for Tatsuya, but he's not raising protests at Miyuki's notice. He knew his younger sister's eagerness to support him, and as far as he knew her helping him too much is at least not displeasing. Rather it's the reverse and so he saw no reason to refuse her.

"Please wait in the living room."

As he was requested by Miyuki, Tatsuya transferred to the living room.

After an under-5-minute wait at the sofa, Miyuki showed up from the dining room, carrying a tray with two glasses of milk ice tea on it. She ought to be drinking hot tea a while back, so her share was probably a remix.

Miyuki soundlessly set coasters and glasses on top of the glass-hard and shiny sofa table. One in front of Tatsuya and the other beside it. And then Miyuki, as if she has the expected privilege -- he was sure she herself made that clear -- sat down beside Tatsuya.

Tatsuya was sitting on a one-seater sofa, so snuggling close to him is impossible. Even so, Miyuki did not show signs of feeling discomfort. Softly smiling, she, together with her brother, brought into her lips the straws of ice-chilled milk tea.

Miyuki let her straw go first. She silently returned her glass onto the table, sat back on the sofa, and looked hard at her brother's profile.

Tatsuya immediately recognized that gaze. He let go of his straw, returned the glass with a soft clink, and met her sister's gaze head on.

"The call just then, it's related to yesterday's talk, isn't it?"

When Tatsuya went into his own room, he notified that he was going [to make a call], but he didn't clarify where to and what business for. And it looked like Miyuki managed to get them right. It's probably not that hard to deduce given that it was just today's yesterday. Even so, Tatsuya felt admiration for her.

"That's right."

"Is it all right to hear out who you talked to on the phone?"

He was a bit stumped over this question. Nevertheless, Tatsuya went to answering her truthfully.

"Lieutenant Fujibayashi."

"... ... Onii-sama, are you requesting for the assistance of the Independent Magic Batallion?"

With Miyuki's question a low-key dissenting view was expressed. Even Tatsuya has shared a common misgiving whether it's all right to allow military intervention in a Yotsuba business. And for that very reason he didn't call Kazama but to Fujibayashi.

"No, I requested to Fujibayashi for an intermediary with Elder Kudou."

"Isn't that dangerous? Communications with the Independent Magic-equipped Battalion are subject to bugging."

Nowadays, freedom of private communication is guaranteed even for military personnel. Although high-compression ultrasonic data communications were installed in voice telephones since over fifty years ago, anti-information leak bugging systems were installed in telephony equipment of vital installations to handle this. It was not conversation tapping via automatically filtering out sound waves apart from those in the audible range, but as there were certain that some hardware was tapped between sender and receiver to listen to sound waves in transit, they can't shake off the possibility that some other equipment was also attached. Even Tatsuya had taken this into account and was on the lookout for it.

"It should be safe. The number I called was Lieutenant's private number. I don't think even the likes of Echelon III can be used to intercept the lines the [Electron Sorceress] privately uses."

Don't worry, Tatsuya was explaining this to Miyuki. However these were careless words not learned in the past.

"... I see. Fujibayashi-san's private telephone number."

It was already too late to think "oh shit". Tatsuya thought just now that it would be a pain to pacify an already enraged younger sister just like April last year.

"By the way, Onii-sama. Where did you get Fujibayashi-san's personal number?"

Even Miyuki's tone and expression were totally the same like in the [broadcast booth barricade case] that preceded the Blanche raids. At that time the chaos was approaching right before him so it was somehow left in the dark, but this time ....

(Now, how do I talk my way out of this?)

Frankly speaking, Tatsuya is totally not in guilty territory. Not only did he know Fujibayashi-san's personal telephone number, but also those of Kazama, Sanada, and Yamanaka. But he didn't imagine that even revealing these would make Miyuki wholeheartedly agree. She may agree on the surface, but deep down she would be hell bent on dragging it out.

Looks like it'll be tough to persuade her this time, Tatsuya thought.

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And as Tatsuya foresaw, Miyuki's temper was not that easy to pacify. Nevertheless she would never do something like explode in anger at or ignore Tatsuya, and so in the public eye they never went on a sibling fight. Objectively Miyuki was only lightly peeved, but even so it took Tatsuya some serious [relationship mending] for two days until Wednesday for him to completely bring back the original intimate sibling relationship.

And then it's September 28, Friday. The night before the long-awaited student council president elections, Tatsuya's home got a phone call from Fujibayashi.

"Fujibayashi-san, is it all right to use this number?"

Tatsuya did not call her [Lieutenant Fujibayashi] but [Fujibayashi-san] because of her civilian getup of frill blouse on country-style long skirt. And he asked [is it all right] because she didn't connect to his room's security-hardened phone but to the number connected to the normal video phone.

["We're not being bugged now. They try that and we have them by the tail."]

But somehow it seemed this was deliberately done.

["Well, we'll be safe even if they did bug us. Our line's covered with a triple layer of dummy signals."]

She may have spoken it like it's nothing, but Tatsuya was more amazed than admired as he was well-informed on even the not-yet-completed machine technology.

"... ... Something was done to make what is normal in a military-only line possible in an average line."

However, he was mistaken.

["It's something you can't realize with current physical technology."]

I see, he thought. It's probably one of the [Electron Sorceress] secret techniques being used liberally. Were Tatsuya to spend time using his [eyesight] he might understand what was being done. However, he has little interest in techniques he's unable to replicate.

["Moreover it's difficult to maintain this condition for prolonged periods so I'll make this brief. Grandfather is receptive with the one-on-one."]

The answer Fujibayashi delivered was, for Tatsuya, an immediate good news.

["Date and time is October 6, Saturday, 18:00. The place is at the Kudou primary residence at Ikoma. You're fine with the schedule?"]

Tatsuya mentally checked his schedule, and confirmed that the day was vacant.

"The schedule's fine with me. And I know the place."

["I see."]

And then Fujibayashi showed an evil expression.

["Grandfather was overjoyed when he heard that Tatsuya-kun wishes for a one-on-one with him."]

"I should be saying, I'm honored, then."

Her expression disappearing on seeing Tatsuya grumble, Fujibayashi giggled.

["You're making a face that says it's a mixed blessing. Just accept it, that's how it is when you rely on that person."]

"Be thankful that you're not even turned away at the gates, is what you're saying."

["Well, you could say that. Prepare yourself in advance, Tatsuya-kun, you're diving right into the multitude of fetters that are rampant in Japan's magic world."]

Tatsuya coolly took Fujibayashi's words, which were spoken with a smile and a menacing eye.

"I was more than prepared a long time ago for that level."

["Very well. I too will be present on that day."]

"I see. Well I look forward to meeting you."

At the same time Tatsuya lightly bowed, the display showing Fujibayashi's smile blacked out.

The call just now was taken at the living room. They didn't join with the

conversation, but Miyuki and Minami were listening at Tatsuya and Fujibayashi's conversation, and Fujibayashi didn't see any problems with that.

"Onii-sama ... is it really all right?"

Miyuki worriedly called out to Tatsuya, who had just finished the call. Someone looking at Minami can tell that she, too, was directing a sympathetic look at Tatsuya. ... ... Sympathy, not worry, probably because Minami correctly understood the significance of having a bond with a [teacher].

"Getting in touch with Kudou Retsu? It's inevitable that you're worried about it."

Tatsuya smiled as he picked up the glass of iced tea. But since the conversation went longer than expected it had ended up lukewarm, so he returned it to the table without sipping it.

A light mist swirled inside of that glass. To lower only the temperature of the contents without freezing the glass, the air in contact with the iced tea was subject to mid-air condensation.

Needless to say it was Miyuki's magic. It was turning back tea at almost room temperature into iced tea, without the expected chilling and freezing. When Tatsuya indicated wordlessly his thanks with a smile, Miyuki silently looked down, bashful.

Tatsuya moistened his throat with the well-chilled straight tea, then resumed with his answer to the question.

"Kudou Retsu took an interest in me, so this is not related to the task at hand. And what's more it's not on the meaning of some quite interesting greenhorn. Perhaps Kudou Retsu knew about my origins and my magic."

Miyuki was wide-opened at that. She was probably duly surprised at the last half of her brother's words. Here an overly and specially regarded adverse effect on the Yotsuba had appeared, but Tatsuya felt no special need to reprove it. At present, it's enough for Miyuki to be on the look out only at the Yotsuba. Tatsuya will handle vigilance at the Ten Master Clans and other magician organizations.

"I heard Kudou Retsu was close with the previous head of the Yotsuba, and with that link he was the private teacher of Yotsuba Miya and Yotsuba Maya."

"The previous head ... that was our grandfather, wasn't it?"

"Yes. The leader of *that incident* when the Yotsuba's *infamy* was broadcast to the world."

For some reason Miyuki smiled a little. When Tatsuya made an [Eh?] expression, she amusingly giggled more and more.

"... Pardon me. Onii-sama has been speaking as if it was other people's problem."

Tatsuya furrowed his brows in doubt.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Come on, Onii-sama. If the world knew of the truth behind [Scorched Halloween], they would be too busy to even think what Grandfather had done, right?"

Tatsuya, at that instant, as if he gulped down aojiru instead of cold tea -- though in fact Tatsuya wouldn't make that mistake -- his expression changed into a light pale expression somewhat different from being expressionless.

"... At any rate there are those details, so it's no mystery even though Kudou Retsu knew much of me."

"... And that's all right with you?"

Miyuki timidly asked with an inarticulate tone.

While it's true that [it's okay not to be silent] when there are no one else listening, it's not something to be asked even for a girl who's still sixteen.

"I'm not keeping silent."

But for Tatsuya, he has no hesitation in saying that out.

"The opponent was once the [world's wiliest]. Try as I might to silence myself, actually doing it might be difficult. I don't think that would be necessary. What is said for myself is personal data of a strategic-level magician. It's very unlikely that Kudou Retsu doesn't understand the importance of keeping secrets."

Tatsuya just now was addressing him as [Kudou Retsu], not [teacher] and not [Elder]. Perhaps he's aware that he said that out often. Perhaps he limited it to places where there is no one else listening, but he was declaring that he has no intention of paying respect to Kudou Retsu. Because of the parasite doll experiments, Tatsuya perhaps recognized that Kudou Retsu is never a nice person.

Even so Tatsuya highly valued Kudou Retsu's intelligence and abilities. He decided that there's no use keeping silent since he judged that the old man understood the merits of keeping a joker like Shiba Tatsuya covered up.

"Besides there's no state like we remain as antagonists against Kudou Retsu. From here on, we should consider this as squaring the books on lendings and borrowings."

"We can depend on them, right?"

"It isn't required for allies to be ever dependable partners. In short, it's in times of need that it's best to move according to our requests. And for that there's no problem in paying out an equivalent compensation."

Minami did not totally get what the siblings were talking about. However, she did not bother to ask her mistress or her mistress' brother. She was taught that unnecessary curiosity is forbidden for a maid working at her masters' house, and so right now she was observing them.

Chapter 2

September 29, Saturday. This year, both the general student body meeting and the election of the student body president finished without drama. In order to prevent invalid ballots like last year's in the ceremonial election, from this year on, disposable short-range wireless cards were distributed when the students entered, the cards were adapted to become voting apparatus when they got to their seats. As in most years there was only one candidate, 'Approved' and 'Opposed' buttons had been provided on the card. It was designed to transmit which button was pressed so that the votes could be tallied.

Once the electronic message was sent, the cards were thrown away. The electronic tags on the cards were developed enough to be called cheap but it was still more expensive than paper. Was this truly necessary expenditure for a simple high school election was a natural thought. However, with the donation of the cards from a company affiliated with the Kitayama clan, the problem was resolved and this method was adopted. Consequently, Shizuku's family made a belated expansion into the commercial field of academic magic by effectively securing a foothold at First High.

Putting aside those adult considerations, the new method of electronic voting allowed real time results, and so Miyuki was invested into the office of Student body president with a roughly one hundred percent 'approved'. No one was hitting

'opposed' even as a joke, was this adoration or fear……. It was too difficult to determine which it was.

"And so, let us celebrate Miyuki's inauguration as student council president. Cheers!"

At Erika's prompt, every one hoisted up their soft drink glasses up. The chorus of cheers came from the relatives, friends and kouhai that had assembled at Einebriese; essentially from: Tatsuya, Leo, Mizuki, Mikihiko, Honoka, Shizuku, Minami, Izumi, Kasumi and Kento. Kasumi didn't hang out with Tatsuya's group all that much but today Izumi had dragged her.

"Well. It's inevitable to call it inevitable."

No one contested the comment Erika made immediately after the toast.

"Of course! It's unthinkable for anyone other than Miyuki-senpai to be First High's student council president! No one else is fit to represent the school in ability! Talent! Beauty! Elegant deportment! The results were a heavenly judgement!"

Instead of a person the remark, there was an extremely agitated underclassman.

"Uh, oh really?"

The seated Miyuki cringed severely at the aggressive enthusiasm. Kasumi felt like throwing in the towel at her younger twin's shameful behavior so she sipped her drink as if it had nothing to do with her.

"Miyuki, have you decided who the officers are?"

While everyone else---even Tatsuya---was hesitating to speak, Shizuku gallantly asked the question or rather she was completely ignoring Izumi.

At her words, Izumi gazed at Miyuki even more fervently. Honoka was also deeply interested but, her eyes flickered back and forth between Miyuki and Tatsuya evenly.

Miyuki was aware of both of their gazes but, she pretended she wasn't aware of either---especially Izumi's---as she answered Shizuku's question.

"I thought I would ask Izumi-chan to be vice president"

Izumi's cry of joy was indistinguishable from a scream, naturally even more embarrassed Kasumi shut her mouth and pretended the scene had nothing to do with her harder.

"I am still deciding about the other officers. I think I want Honoka's help as well but….."

As she spoke, Miyuki cast a flickering look not at Honoka but at Tatsuya.

It might have been due to Miyuki's display of hesitation, neither Shizuku or Honoka ventured more questions.

Although there were some rambunctious female students, generally speaking the party remained peaceful and respectful of the cafe's ambiance until it ended. Since it was Saturday, they left the shop before sunset. That being said, when Tatsuya and the girls arrived at their house the western sky had turned from dark bright red to indigo.

Appetizers had accompanied the cuisine they had ordered at Einebriese but, they were eating a suitable quantity. Tomorrow was Sunday and neither Tatsuya, Miyuki nor Minami had had dinner yet today.

Miyuki and Minami started a slight tiff over who would pour the tea but, Tatsuya's authoritative declaration of 'Today is a celebration for Miyuki after all' made Miyuki return from the kitchen, a measure that incited a temporary peace, and sat down next to him fairly close.

Minami entered the living room carrying a tray when she saw them together her eyebrows twitched in surprise. However, she said nothing, she showed no more emotion, she placed milk tea in front of Miyuki and coffee in front of Tatsuya and stood to the side of the table.

Tatsuya did not even tell Minami to 'sit' today. Rather, he intended to release her from her housework and ask her to leave the room. However, Miyuki wished to discuss something with Minami and spoke to her before taking her teacup.

"Minami-chan."

"Yes, Miyuki-neesama."

"By the way, I wish you to join the student council as the secretary, Minami-chan."

Minami's expression did not overtly change but, her body stiffened as if under pressure. And even people other than Tatsuya would notice that she was unmistakably keeping herself from trembling.

"....agreed"

The tone was more stiff than humble as she gave Miyuki a very short reply.

If she spoke honestly, Minami would probably be resisting the idea of joining the student council. However, she also understood being attached to the student council was somewhat convenient for fulfilling her duties as a guardian. Her half-hearted reply just now was a sign of her inner conflict.

“That’s right. It would also be useful to get around the CAD restrictions. Minami should become a student council officer.”

“You’re right, Oniisama.”

Tatsuya supported Miyuki’s idea and Miyuki happily bridged the gap between them.

Watching the distance between her sibling masters become near zero, Minami realized that it would be futile to say anything.

Tatsuya might have been reluctant---Miyuki was probably even more reluctant---but the siblings were unable to end the day with only this type of peaceful problem. After tea time was partly over, Tatsuya went to his own room and got that phone to make a phone call. The number he called was a direct line to the Yotsuba clan head. However, Maya did not answer the phone.

[Tatsuya-dono, I am sorry but this is inconvenient for Okusama right now]

He was so informed by Hayama who answered instead, the brusque explanation did not even say what she was doing. Apparently, she was pretending to be out, Tatsuya thought.

However, he did not feel like asking why. It was unnecessary to inform Maya of tonight’s business directly. It was good to have an alibi when informing her of his business. Giving an apologetic message to Hayama was a smoother way of fulfilling his purpose than talking to Maya.

“So then, will you pass on a message to Obaue regarding the duty I undertook the other day”

[Please go on.]

Hayama might have anticipated the request, his agreement was rather prompt.

"I wish to borrow help from the Kudou clan to search for the target. I have already arranged for a meeting with the former Kudou clan head through the Fujibayashi clan."

[Ohhh…]

He could not discern just from the voice whether Hayama was actually surprised or merely pretending to be surprised. It was doubtful that he could tell even if he saw his face.

[You are not asking the Independent Battalion for aid; you are asking help from Kudou-kakka?]

"Wherever the original request came from, I believe it is best to avoid asking aid from the military regarding Yotsuba business."

[You don't mind asking a favor from the Kudou clan?]

"There is a high probability that this Zhou is allied with the 'Traditionalists', right? If that is so, then a good plan would be to ask for aid from the clans of 'nine' who have a long standing antagonistic relationship with the 'Traditionalists'. Besides, the Kudou clan owes us a personal favor over last month's incident. If the time between receiving the favor and repaying the favor gets too long, things get uncomfortable, I believe it is best if the scales get balanced before that happens."

Hayama's amused laugh could be heard from the receiver. This was apparently genuine amusement. He hadn't particularly aimed for this to happen thought Tatsuya as he apathetically waited for Hayama's reply.

[Despite your youth, you understand the ways of the world quite well, Tatsuya-dono.]

It might be called a benefit of maturity, Hayama quickly recovered from his fit of laughter. He did not conceal his amusement, however.

[Certainly, asking for aid from the Kudou clan at this time is a wise choice in many respects. Fine. I will inform Okusama.]

"Please do so."

Despite knowing it wouldn't be seen, Tatsuya bowed his head to the transceiver.

[As a condition for getting help, detailed reports are not necessary. Since the other party is military and one of the Ten Master clans, I will inform Okusama to leave this matter to Tatsuya-dono's discretion.]

After firing off his big parting shot, Hayama cut off the connection.

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Hayama, who had spoken to Tatsuya with the receiver in speaker mode, hung up the phone and bowed deeply to the wall opposite the desk.

"It is as you heard, Okusama."

Tatsuya's deduction about Maya's being out was right on the mark. However, for her to be in the same room listening to him speak was completely beyond his expectations.

Maya had been forcibly keeping her mouth shut for a while. Apparently, stifling her laughter had been an extreme hardship. Perhaps she was aware that Hayama addressing her meant that the phone call was over, she let out a laugh that was unbecoming of a lady.

Even faced with the tarnishment of his mistress's dignified manner, Hayama's deferential attitude did not change. Not only did he not verbally admonish her, he did not direct even a shard of disapproval with his eyes toward Maya.

However, Maya might have felt uncomfortable under his stoic gaze, her laughter soon faded away.

"Please forgive me, Hayama-san. What Tatsuya-san said was so adorable, I couldn't restrain myself."

Maya used a handkerchief to wipe away the few tears that had leaked from her eyes. Thus, her expression switched to complete seriousness.

"Who on earth has been filling up that boy with such twisted wisdom?"

And Maya cocked her head with a serious expression.

"I am not aware of any error in Tatsuya-dono's stated reasoning."

“In one aspect, he’s correct but it’s not normal.”

Hayama avouched a defense of Tatsuya. Perhaps, for that reason, Maya replied with a disinterested tone and look.

“Although ordinarily, an exchange of favors would deepen bonds.”

“Tatsuya-dono does not need bonds born from an exchange of favors, right.”

“Ah, youth.”

Hayama neither agreed nor disagreed with those words. However, sensing her frivolity was inviting censure, Maya changed the subject.

“By the way, how is the search for Zhou Gongjin going? I wonder if there are any new clues.”

The quick change of topic did not faze him, there was no hesitation in Hayama’s reply.

“There are no new clues. Unfortunately, there’s been nothing since he fled after the small scale battle near Kyoto’s Sanzen-in at the end of last month.”

“So that’s where we lost his trail. Since it would be undesirable for a foreign magician to incur the wrath of a famous temple like Sanzen-in in this country…...the ‘Traditionalists’ are probably at work behind the scenes.”

Maya murmured in a disgusted tone. I have heard that they say that in order to protect the traditions of ancient magic, they have combined their schools. However, actually while this band of ancient magicians known as the ‘Traditionalists’ cooperated with the former Lab 9 for their own purposes for the childish reason of not getting the results they wanted, they hold a grudge against the clans of ‘9’ who they mistakenly blame, prompting their unprincipled and disorderly acts of hostility and harassment. Maya hated their childish mentality in a way that was different from their hatred towards the clans of ‘9’.

“Okusama, is it alright not to pass this information on to Tatsuya dono?”

“No need. Mitsugu san is thoroughly investigating the vicinity of Oohara, right? Besides, that man is probably not going to stay in the same area for long.”

Hayama bowed his head acknowledging his mistress’ point.

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Tatsuya's daily pattern had recently become to spend evenings at Yakumo's temple on the practical development of a new magic(=practice), have early morning practices after he awoke, he had school afterwards if it was a weekday, and if it was a weekend developing the theory of the new magic.

Today, Sunday, September 30th. On this day as well, after breakfast, Tatsuya secluded himself in the underground lab to wrestle with the problem of debugging the new magic.

"....no problem with the process that produces Baryon. From the beginning, it was something that could be done based off just the analysis and maintaining the necessary standards of speed and uniform composition is possible."

He was not murmuring a monologue without thinking, he was doing it consciously. Tatsuya was so far at the end of his rope right now that if he did not voice his ideas, they wouldn't settle in his mind.

"Next, there are no problems with the movement type spell according to the simulation. It is essentially the same as the movement of gas after all. There is also the trick of using Lorentz power like Lina but, considering the nature of FAE, moving it directly by magic is probably faster."

Tatsuya sighed deeply. In the end, these were his only conclusions.

"As I thought, the key is structuring it so the movement type magic finishes within the time meant by FAE?"

After using analytical magic, he concluded he had to complete the movement type magic in the minuscule amount of time before the laws of physics regained its coercive power. For just outputting the magic sequence, he had an advantage over a normal magician due to his ability to flashcast. However, in order to complete the magic, interference power was essential. For Tatsuya who originally only had interference power for 'Analytical' use and 'revival' use, this was a serious problem.

Tatsuya felt that he needed to change his mood so he went up one floor around noon.

He perceived the abnormality immediately after he finished ascending the stair. When he examined the inside of the house, there was a non-human presence.

"A synthetic body? No. An artificial spirit?"

Artificial spirit was the name, modern magic assigned to a certain type of ‘sequence’ (a shikigami or a shiki). ‘Spirit’ was a natural phenomenon that accompanied a psion information body described by the information dimension that continued to remain as an independent psion information body after applicable phenomenon terminated. This man made ‘spirit’ developed by processes mainly induced by ancient magic techniques for creating independent information bodies was an ‘artificial spirit’. However, all independent information bodies with the potential to be subjugated that can be summoned by a ‘sequence’ were not manufactured by these techniques; psion information that possessed a naturally developed pushion information body as a core that could be captured and enslaved were rather numerous.

The independent information body stopped in mid air as if it was clinging to the overhang of the house’s wall. These spells were the same as the protective spells to keep out intruders on First High’s outer wall. That being said…..

(Since I don’t know what kind of data it’ll be able to glean.)

Tatsuya did not think his knowledge of magic sequences was complete. The ‘Shiki’ could be equipped with a function he didn’t know of, he could not ignore the possibility that it could search the inside of the house from outside the wall of defensive spells.

Once again, Tatsuya directed his ‘eye’ through the walls to the artificial spirit.

He analyzed the structural information.

The independent information body was constructed of nothing but psions.

The lack of a pushion core meant it was an artificial spirit as he thought. And so like a magic sequence, he could analyze it completely.

Tatsuya extended his right hand toward the artificial spirit. There was no CAD in that hand.

“Variable input: locked on structural data of the artificial spirit.”

Instead of outputting an activation sequence from a CAD, the magic sequence construction process surged from the data center of Tatsuya’s magic calculation area and sent it into the actualization sector.

“Magic sequence projection: ‘Dissection’ activate”

An invisible flash burst.

The bonds that formed the construction information of the artificial spirit were all completely severed; the psion information body became a chaotic clump of psions and was engulfed by the information dimension.

Just as he opened the door to the living room, Tatsuya was exhorted by Miyuki.

“Oniisama, what on earth was that just now?”

Even though it was labeled exhorting, Miyuki was not angry with Tatsuya, the foremost emotion on her face was anxiety.

“You know what happened just now?”

Tatsuya expressed his astonishment. Apparently, Miyuki sensed his usage of ‘dissection’. His concern over the detection of his magic usage seemed to be in one respect an expression of his pride in not having easily detectable magic but, Tatsuya had no such conceit. Minami who had trailed after Miyuki when she came out clearly did not understand the siblings’ conversation.

“I didn’t sense it well enough to say that I know what happened but…… I feel as if Oniisama used ‘dissection’.”

“Aah. An artificial spirit was examining the inside of the house.”

Tatsuya hadn’t intended to inform her himself but he also didn’t intend to conceal it so, he answered yes to his sister’s question and explained the situation.

“Perhaps, it’s related to the job you accepted last month.”

“Is this the deed of the person called Zhou Gongjin?”

“Maybe an underling, It’s probably the work of compatriots of those who are sheltering him.”

After he said that, Tatsuya let out an unusually clear sigh.

“Fumiya and his sister were followed?”

Miyuki and Minami’s eyes widened at his murmur.

“Can’t be…..a tail would not be permitted with Ayako-chan around.”

Miyuki’s shock even overcame her firm belief that everything Tatsuya said was correct but, Minami did not have the latitude to feel doubt.

"It could have been done deliberately."

"Ayako-chan purposely let someone tail her to this house!?"

Psions coiled around Miyuki.

It was a harbinger of a magic explosion.

However, Miyuki was maturing. Before she unconsciously actualized magic, she intentionally clamped it down. Tatsuya's eyes narrowed as he watched the process.

"I think it was slightly different. Most likely Ayako ….no, not just Ayako but Fumiya as well might have been forbidden to act against the tail even if they spotted them."

Listening to her brother's guess restored Miyuki's calm but not be any means completely.

"By who…...that shouldn't be considered. For what reason."

"I can't get the truth without asking but, they might intend to use me as a decoy."

"They dare!?"

"Miyuki, don't be angry. I said we can't know the truth without asking, right."

"But…"

Miyuki had already fallen into the trap of 'not considering any alternatives'. However, Tatsuya did not rebuke her for that.

"Besides, it is reasonable to use me as a decoy. The opponent this time is an opponent capable of gravely injuring Kuroba Mitsugu. Even though it's in hand, they don't know it's a pestle. Having me who won't fall to anything but a fatal wound bear the full brunt is not a mistake tactically."

So don't be angry about it, Tatsuya smiled.

"Oniisama!"

However, this reply indicated Miyuki wouldn't permit any more of this decoy stuff.

"Please, do not talk anymore about carelessly risking your body! It's not alright as long as you don't die or as long as no wounds remain, even you should understand that!"

The unthinkable menacing look from Miyuki halted any excuses from Tatsuya.

“Please, Oniisama think about how I will feel before you let yourself get injured!”

“.....sorry.”

Tatsuya somehow squeezed out an apology,

“Minami, sorry for making you wait. You have made the preparations for lunch, right?”

then he changed the subject and addressed Minami.

“Yes, Tatsuya-oniisama. Please come into the dining room, you too Miyuki-oneesama.”

Minami did not consider ‘troubling Tatsuya a little’, she was genuinely a good obedient girl.

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Tatsuya analyzed the human construct spirit aka the shikigami and around that time.

“Uuhhaa!?”

In a small park about five hundred meters from Tatsuya’s house, a male around thirty sitting on a bench suddenly let out a high pitched noise.

The male sitting next to him flusteredly looked right to left several times. The attention obstruction barrier, he had put up, was functioning normally. While they knew that their images and voices did not register into anyone’s memory, even so he whispered ‘What happened?”.

“The shikigami was erased…”

“Erased? Not reversal or theft?”

“Neither, I think.”

The man being questioned turned his head to the left and right a number of times as he said ‘I don’t know why’.

"The feedback from the Shikigami abruptly disappeared."

"Are you saying a person in that house used an obscure Buddhist unraveling incantation?"

"Wrong! …no, I don't know."

His confusion reaching it's peak, the man who had made the high pitched sound calmed down somewhat.

"I don't feel the signal the spell emits. It's the same for you, right?"

"That, well, it's true but……"

This pair of ancient magicians had divvied up the job of searching of Tatsuya's house between them. One manipulated the shikigami and the other maintained the security. The one in charge of security in order to prevent injuries caused by a 'reversal', in addition to the barrier spell, deployed a magical radar to detect signs of magic.

"However, there shouldn't be a way to spontaneously dissolve a shikigami without interfering by that arcane art, right? I don't believe your control of the shikigami faltered."

"Of course not! But….."

His expression once again confused, the man turned his head while it was still aimed downward. A shadow suddenly fell on the ground his gaze was aimed at.

The two men looked up in surprise. Their shock was from the fact that there was a sign that someone had clearly approached them without them being aware of it while they had a barrier to keep people approaching them up, however, that shock over the enemy shadow turned to wariness and belligerence.

The person standing before them was wearing buddhist garments. He was wearing an overhanging wicker hat and monk's stole and had a vajra bell in one hand.

The men knew from their investigation of the target of the friendly relationship between the Shiba siblings and Kyuuchou temple. The fact that the famed Kokonoe Yakumo was the master of Kyuuchou temple had been deeply etched into their minds since they had taken on this duty. The pair's eyes met instantly, they chose flight over a pre-emptive strike.

The instant their hips rose, as if he had anticipated that moment, the monk standing before the pair rang the vajra bell.

The clear timbre resounded at the pair from three directions.

With shocked expressions, the man seated on the left looked left and the man seated on the right looked right.

Two monks identical to the one in front were waving vajra bells in exactly the same manner.

The pair who had started to stand lost power in their legs.

By the moment the pair realized they under a spell, their minds were already halfway unconscious.

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Tatsuya visited Kyuuchou Temple to borrow the underground training room and was promptly invited into a room in the monks' quarter when he arrived. It was the same room, he had met with Yakumo to consult with him on the Parasite Doll matter in. Yakumo sat down at the same time as Tatsuya and started the conversation without a preamble.

"It seems like you're entangled in another troublesome matter."

With just that, Tatsuya was aware that this was about today's shikigami incident.

"I'm sorry, have I caused you difficulties?"

If you thought about it then Yakumo's usage of long distance monitoring spells in broad daylight on those who could be said to be under his protection in a nearby city wasn't something his pupils are going to observe without saying anything.

"Many of my pupils have an abundance of hot blood."

While smiling wryly, Yakumo answered yes to Tatsuya's question indirectly.

"So then, what happened this time?"

Perhaps Tatsuya had to answer in some way but, as to be expected, he was puzzled about how to answer. However, that was only for a minuscule period. He decided to take the middle path between answering and not answering.

“I think this trouble is related to the work I took on.”

“Work? For Kazuma-kun?”

“No, the work did not come from the military.”

Yakumo’s eyes narrowed as they remained in their smiling state. As he smiled. a strong light was emitted from his eyes.

“Is it alright to ask about the details of this work?”

“There’s a good chance that it will become a job in the Kyoto district. So, I think it's best if I don’t cause you more trouble, Master.”

Yakumo’s lips twitched up slightly. The light in his eyes abated, the slight smile became his usual one.

“You don’t need to be so diffident. There is somewhat of a connection to the ‘traditionalists’.”

It was unexpected that Yakumo was the one who brought up the name of ‘traditionalists’ but Tatsuya’s conviction was that his family’s search for the magician did not fall under Yakumo’s purview.

“As I thought, this is related to the group of ancient magicians called ‘traditionalists’.”

"They are not called that, they have merely claimed the name……."

Yakumo's display of fastidiousness was cute to Tatsuya but he refrained from showing it.

"Therefore, Master must not lend a hand. A civil war between fellow ancient magicians is no joke."

There was no one within the nation's ancient magicians' that took the name of 'traditionalists' lightly. From the beginning, the ancient magicians who claimed the name 'traditionalists' were not particularly loyal to the traditional training regimes, they had cooperated with the former Lab 9 because they desired the know how of modern magic. For those who had continued to strictly defend their traditions, it was shameless of them to claim the mantle of 'traditionalists'. Many of the magicians attached to the Traditionalists were employed in covert operations, so the number of magicians who knew not much more about the faction than the name who proclaimed 'the Traditionalists must be purged' is not small.

"Aw nuts, I'm still far from enlightenment."

Perhaps he recognized that the hostility he felt was unlike him, Yakumo let out an embarrassed smile.

"Are the guys who were peeking at my house still secured here? There's still a little something I wish to ask them?"

"It's impossible today."

Yakumo answered Tatsuya's question with a penetratingly cold smile.

"I'm a little tired today. I'll go take a rest in a quiet place now."

Of course, Tatsuya was not overwhelmed by that level of pressure. He continued to ask polite questions with an amiable smile.

"Is that so? Then won't you at least tell me of their background?"

"Oh, those guys are wild magicians employed by the 'Traditionalists'."

"Wild?"

Doubtfully, Tatsuya repeated the word.

"Do you mean free magicians?"

"You can call them that also."

"There are people like that in this country?"

Magicians were a scarce human resource, all of them from the good to the bad were under a country's control. Tatsuya himself was an exception in that he was not under governmental control but people like him were corralled in general under the private combat power of the twenty eight families, the Ten Master Clans system could be called an indirect form of government management. It was a novel surprise for Tatsuya that a magician with practical skills could be unaffiliated with an organization.

"There are. There are a quite a few people who can't acquire the skills of modern magic but can use unique skills."

".....so you mean there are quite a few free magicians on the ancient magic side?"

"Well. I don't know the exact number but, I believe it's not a small number."

In short for this job, this meant he could potentially be taking on more magician opponents than he had supposed before now. In his head, Tatsuya revised the level of difficulty upward.

Common Era 2096, October 1. The inauguration of the new student council of the First High School attached to the National Magic University. Members: President Shiba Miyuki, Vice President Saegusa Izumi, Treasurer Mitsui Honoka, Secretary Sakurai Minami and Secretarial Chief Shiba Tatsuya.

Of course, there were objections to the enigmatic post of Secretarial Chief. The Staff Room that normally interfere with the the student council's granting of positions asked 'What the heck is this?'. The default organization of student councils in schools was 'President, Vice President, Treasurer and Secretary'. There was no 'Secretarial Chief' post, however, Miyuki repelled all opposition with a smile that neither agreed or disagreed and made the statement, 'the official nickname of Secretarial Chief is Secretary'. Not one person was able to make the reasonable objection that there was no reason for the 'Secretarial Chief' to be nicknamed secretary.

It was also a fact that a multitude of students wanted Tatsuya to remain a student council officer. If Miyuki went out of control, the only one who could stop it was Tatsuya. That was something acknowledged by the third and second year students and if Tatsuya was driven off the student council, they would be able to see Miyuki go out of control with their own eyes.

The significance of this morning to the student council of First High was fraught with fear of political dictatorship but, the dominated students looked happy while appearing that they wished for a little rescue. A dictatorial system run by an Idol might be a good way to put it. For the dictator, it was a type of paradise.

Of course, Miyuki didn't have a desire to dominate, much less aspirations of becoming a dictator. The truth was she was reluctant to even take up the duties of student council president. Her true unadulterated feeling was 'wouldn't it be great if Oniisama became student council president'. And, would fall into dangerous supplemental delusions such as 'If that happened then I would go all out doing anything for him, vice president, secretary, tea server, anything'; if anyone asked.

Anyway, Miyuki did not want Tatsuya in a subordinate position to herself. That was in spite of the pointed reminders from the Yotsuba clan of what their relationship was, it was unendurable for her. So she created the unusual title of 'Secretarial Chief' to elevate him a little in order to reach a compromise inside herself.

Anyway in these circumstances, all objections and logical arguments about Tatsuya's title of Secretarial Chief were silenced in one hour at the lunch break and another hour after school by Miyuki's persuasive power and peace was finally restored to the student council room.

The timing was probably calculated. The newly inaugurated Club Activities Head and the newly appointed Public Morals Chief came into the Student Council room together.

"Umm, I am looking forward to working well together this year."

"I am looking forward to working with you as well, Yoshida-kun."

Miyuki replied to the nervous Mikihiko who never lost his stiffness while attempting a friendly attitude with a smile filled with affection.

Betraying the expectations of the majority that Kanon's successor would be Shizuku, Mikihiko was chosen to be the new Public Morals Chief. The Public Morals Chief was elected from and by the nine committee members; this time it was a close contest with five votes for Mikihiko and four votes for Shizuku. Incidentally, Mikihiko voted for Shizuku and Shizuku voted for Mikihiko. There was an attempt to halt Mikihiko's assumption of the office of Public Morals Chief because he was a former second course student but the majority of the committee members yielded to the outstanding force of Shizuku's aura of ' I don't want that bothersome job'.

Therefore Shizuku abandoned the nervous Mikihiko and engaged in animated girl talk with Honoka like "Isn't it great that Tatsuya-san is remaining on the Student Council?" "Uh, huh….."

This was the first face to face between the student council president and the newly elected public morals chief, they discussed the problem of choosing public morals committee members to replace the retirees but, as it happened at this time, the student council had yet to make the three recommendations from the second years so that they would stay on the public morals committee so, Mikihiko's part of the conversation was really over with the greeting. Apparently, there were some procedural concerns to take care of so, Mikihiko had some time to kill. He and Tatsuya went to a corner of the room with an isolated terminal emplaced.

"What's up, Tatsuya?"

Mikihiko thought Tatsuya's posture indicated something was going on so, he sat down on the chair in front of the terminal and whispered the question to Tatsuya who was standing to the side.

"First, take a look at this for me."

He didn't answer the question directly, Tatsuya manipulated the terminal's keyboard with one hand.

The monitor displayed a string of characters and a graph.

"An activation sequence?"

It was an activation sequence in machine code not converted into psion signals but, it was translated into model language that was easy for people to understand and a graph.

"Is this….a description of an activation sequence that constructs a shikigami? You were lucky to find such rare data."

"It was by chance. What I wanted to ask is if shikigami construction differs by school or something like that."

It seemed like Mikihiko assumed that he pulled it out of some library. He didn't say that he had created this analysis himself, he was indirectly inquiring about the origin.

"Of course, there are. What's more, there are easy to spot peculiarities. For example, this….should be a Shugendou school. The occultist using this shikigami is likely a member of the Shugendou Touzan group, unmistakably."

"Are there factions in Shugendou?"

"I'd call the schools rather than factions, no, sects? A Shugendou descended from Shingon Buddhism."

"Shingon Buddhism? I thought shikigami were Onmyou spells, mage arts and the like, but, are there spells that support shikigami in the esoteric buddhist teachings?"

Mikihiko's face had a somewhat proud look as he nodded his answer to Tatsuya's naive questions.

"There are. Practitioners linked to the esoteric buddhist teaching call them, Gohou though. They are in essence the same."

Just then, Mikihiko casually returned his eyes to the monitor and a "Oh?" look surfaced.

"What's this? The way it's arranged is unusual and weird……."

After looking at the monitor for awhile, Mikihiko looked up at Tatsuya with a look of comprehension.

"I see, I understand why you're being so sneaky, Tatsuya. You pulled this data out of an underground website, right?"

"Why do you think so?"

Tatsuya's question was purely a request for an answer but, Mikihiko nodded with a "Got it, got it" look.

"After all, isn't this shikigami clearly for bugging and surveillance?"

"Really?"

Tatsuya's single word meant "Limited utility in shikigami are distinctive?" however,

"It's clearly made to be used for illegal purposes."

Mikihiko made a more restrictive interpretation.

“Oh. A dangerous thing. It was correct to consult with you, Mikihiko. I’ll erase this data.”

“Yes, that’s the best thing to do.”

Tatsuya’s casual flattery made Mikihiko smile in good humour.

Mikihiko returned to public morals headquarters to draw up the patrol record---it had been a very long time since a public morals chief had personally drawn up the patrol record---it was nearly time for the school gate to close, the new club activities chairman was the next to come and say hello.

“Igarashi-kun, congratulations on assuming the club activities chairmanship.”

“Uh, huh. Thank you, President.”

The new chairman’s nervousness really went up in front of Miyuki.

“In order for the smooth management of the student council affairs, we depend on the cooperation of the club management committee for many things. I am looking forward to working with you.”

“My-myself included! I believe I will be using the help of everyone in the student council in various matters. I look forward to working with you, as well.”

Izumi who was watching the meeting between Miyuki and Igarashi from not far away, murmured “he looks somewhat unreliable” to Honoka who was next to her. Honoka’s only answer was a pained smile.

“New Chairman Igarashi-senpai seems kind of timid, no rather he seems docile.”

While continuing to work, Izumi casually, as if she just happened to think to mention it, reported her impression of New Chairman Igarashi to Miyuki.

“I wonder why? He did seem extremely tense.”

“Tense?”

Izumi’s voice was filled with extreme doubt.

“Miyuki do you know Igarashi?

Tatsuya threw a lifeline to Miyuki who was puzzled on how to respond to Izumi’s overly candid reaction.

“Yes, our classes are different but despite him being someone with superior practical skills, I’ve worked with him countless times on the data management side. However, I think Honoka and Shizuku know him better. I’m certain that they are in the same club.”

Receiving an eye-signal from Miyuki, Honoka opened her mouth.

“He is the younger brother of last year’s girls biathlon club president, Igarashi-senpai.”

“Because he is not inclined to any specialized magic, his performance records in competition aren’t all that great but, in terms of ability alone, he can’t be criticized.”

“Ability alone?”

Sensing the implications in Shizuku’s statement, Tatsuya parroted her words into a question.

“Igarashi-kun, how should I put it…...calling him timid doesn’t seem quite right but, at critical moments.”

A tendency to hesitate. That trait meant that if he was driven into a corner and had to take a reckless chance to get out, he would self-destruct…..a good way to put it might be to say his disposition meant he fared poorly in competitions.

“So he’s more of a staff officer or a second in command. Not really suited for leadership.”

After Honoka had painstaking chosen somewhat mild words to critique him, Shizuku spoiled it with her severe evaluation.

“Come to think of it, why isn’t Tomitsuka-kun the new chairman?”

Mikihiko posed the question after the work of the public morals committee was done and he once again came to the student council room.

“The gossip beforehand made it seem like Tomitsuka-senpai was a sure thing?”

Perhaps because she's so familiar with him as a fellow public morals member, Kasumi readily chimed in her agreement with Mikihiko's comment.

"Hattori-senpai probably felt differently."

By implicitly pointing out that it was for the Club Management Group to decide who would be chairman, Miyuki pressed them to cease their anti-Igarashi gossip.

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There was a brief pause from the student council president's election until the student council officers were appointed then, the preparations for the Thesis Competition went full throttle. Even though in the Kyoto exhibition, the realm of pure theory had the upperhand, the Thesis competition still required a presentation of magic which meant they had to rapidly work on preparing the devices for the performance.

However, unlike last year, the place where they were making stuff was not mainly in the school courtyard but the lecture hall. The great clamor of last year's production was reduced in volume to make the uproar a comparative shadow of the previous year. Silent figures could be seen constructing elaborate blueprints.

While Tatsuya was watching Isori direct the construction of the 'Projection type Magic Circle' from the second floor of the lecture hall, he met with Mikihiko regarding security.

"---so I believe it will be alright, if we don't just select from the public morals committee, instead we'll solicit for volunteers extensively and select guard members from them as usual."

"Of course. Since the public morals committee only has nine people and that's not enough to work well. I think you'll have a lot of people interested in guarding the site not just guarding the representatives."

"I believe the person in overall charge of security this year is Hattori-senpai?"

"Senpai is in an online conference with the persons in charge of the other schools' security forces."

"The other schools haven't expressed any dissatisfaction about a First High student being in charge overall for two years in a row?"

"That's fine. The overall security chief is dispatched by the school which won Monolith Code in the Nine Schools Competition seems to be an unwritten rule."

"Eh, that's how it goes."

"Juumonji-senpai being the chief last year wasn't just because he was a member of the ten master clans."

The ones who interrupted Tatsuya and Mikihiko's conversation were Leo and Erika. They had been quiet up until then to keep from interfering but, the insider info made them speak without thinking.

"Ahh, it's the first time I've heard of it as well."

"The truth is I didn't know until recently as well. It's not something known without being told."

However, Tatsuya and Mikihiko didn't seem to mind and just made a show of teasing them.

"Then, which one are you going to take care of for me, guarding or security?"

"So my cooperation is taken as a given?"

"Of course. I'm counting on you."

The impudent comments only made Tatsuya smile without a word and he didn't bother to pretend that he was going to turn down Mikihiko's request. He had come to speak to Mikihiko for the sake of cooperation between the student council and the public morals committee, however he was also ready to lend his own personal efforts.

"Okay. How about I take on site security?"

The place called Kyoto was convenient for reasons other than the work after all.

"Then, I'll help you out there as well."

What could he be thinking, Leo had suddenly raised his hand when he heard that.

"If I become site security, I'll need to do a preliminary inspection."

---no, what he was thinking was quite obvious.

“Eeh, since I’m going to Kyoto with Tatsuya-kun, you’ll join the guards. That’s your strong point right, being a meat wall?”

Just then, Erika voiced a different opinion in a tone that did not sound at all joking.

“Aren’t meat walls just for getting hit and stabbed! Don’t say anything so whacked!”

“Sometimes being hit is a choice.”

Naturally, the second half was shocking. However, the earnest Mikihiko was bothered by the first half of the comments.

“Erika….you intend to go and stay overnight in Kyoto?”

“That’s what I said, so?”

Going on a round trip in a day between Kyoto and Tokyo was not absolutely impossible, now. For business purposes, it was a rather normal schedule. However, this was a preliminary security inspection, not just the site, the Kyoto conference center and its environs, but a wide area around them had to be inspected. Last year’s incident comes to mind quickly but, conversely, since it was just last year, no one would expect to catch them off-guard so quickly.

“By that…..you want to go on an overnight trip with Tatsuya….?”

“Id-idiot….!”

For some reason the suspicion that she might be taking a trip for a one night stand did not make Erika’s face turn red but white.

“Wh-what?”

That threatening look so desperate and forceful as if her life was in danger caused Mikihiko’s tongue to tangle, unfortunately. Just then, he was overpowered by what he thought as Erika’s excessive response but, when he heard her reasoning, the blood drained from Mikihiko’s face as well.

“What would I do if Miyuki heard that!? She wouldn’t let it go as a joke!”

Mikihiko busily looked hither and thither. Furthermore, his eyes were those of someone on a battlefield. To say he looked like he was in a life and death struggle was not a grandiose exaggeration.

It wasn't let it go as a joke, it was that she wouldn't let it go even though it was just a joke. That wouldn't mean that she was taking their frivolous talk seriously but, rather that she wouldn't forgive them for saying such a thing even when she knew they were joking. That wasn't just a distinct possibility, that was unmistakably how it would go, thought Mikihiko. Was there already an absolute zero cold front bearing down on them already….Mikihiko earnestly feared there was.

However, such nakedly fearful vigilance was reckless behavior.

"....You guys, just what are you thinking about my sister?"

Mikihiko and Erika's necks gave off squeaks as they whipped their heads toward the voice they heard.

Before their eyes as they looked behind them was Tatsuya with a penetratingly cold smile on his face.

"Good grief…...your loose talk took years off my life, Miki."

"My name is Mikihiko…"

The voice, Mikihiko whipped out to make his usual protest, lacked its usual vigor. The truth was Mikihiko was engulfed by sympathy for Erika and it was not for the first time.

They were not directly harmed by Tatsuya, of course. He had just turned an ice cold stare on the pair. However, just that was enough to make Mikihiko fall under the delusion that his life was being whittled away.

It was not the cold of snow and ice. It was the cold of a keen sharp blade. It came directly from its threat to one's existence.

Erika was in a similar state, her face looked completely drained and exhausted.

"I think you were both irresponsibly rude, Erika, Mikihiko."

From their friends' attitudes, they probably hadn't been cleared from suspicion, yet. Tatsuya was yelling his dissatisfaction with his disappointed face. The flattening intimidating look was already gone but, no one needed to be told that he was in ill humor. Not just, the interested parties, Erika and Mikihiko but Leo, the innocent bystander strongly felt the need to change the subject.

"We-well, wouldn't it be alright if all of us were site security? Chiyoda-senpai is going to be clinging to Isori-senpai as she guards him, right and Kitayama is going to be attached to Nakajou-senpai, right?"

Practically, nothing had happened and he probably considered it childish to stay angry. Tatsuya was the one who responded to Leo's tactful attempt.

"Not just Shizuku. Chikura-senpai and Mibu-senpai are also cooperating with her to guard Nakajou-senpai."

Seeing Tatsuya respond positively to the change of conversation, Erika and Mikihiko breathed sighs of relief. No, actually they did not do that---the pair did not actually perform the act---it was just clear from seeing the tension disappear from their manner.

"Kei-senpai should be fine enough even without a guard."

"Kirihara-senpai has volunteered to be Minakami-senpai's guard."

Mikihiko followed up Erika's comment by alluding to who would be guarding the other representative, Minakami Carey. Hearing those words, for some reason Leo let out a groan.

"Minakami-senpai… does that guy really need a guard?"

Apparently, he couldn't understand why there was talk of attaching Kirihara-senpai to Carey.

"Even in our school he's someone that is counted close to the top of the possessors of superior combat power, right? Mikihiko who has been on a team with him should be the most well informed, though."

As Leo had stated, Carey, Hattori and Mikihiko had united as members of this year's Monolith Code team to seize victory for First High. In bouts, he had displayed the defensive power of an iron wall and was a strong player who hadn't allowed his opponents to interfere with the monolith he defended even once.

"Minakami-senpai has extensive knowledge of a lot of individual magics. That's why he was able to completely block his opponents' attacks in Monolith Code, he correctly grasped the opposing players' magic in the first shot and from the second shot on, he was able to counterbalance it with his excellent magic that's the incredible skill he possesses."

A magic spell cannot interfere with a magic spell. Information fortification kept the phenomenon stable (the transformed event) as it advanced, it was a technique that caused the opponent's magic to end in a misfire, area interference worked on targeted zone by 'using event interference power to forbidding the transformed contents to change' by brushing aside the opponent's phenomena interference power, it never interferes with the opponent's magic spell.

However, results were based on the effects the magic induced, in case where that magic interfered with an actual physical phenonomen ultimately it remained a physical phenomenon. Because it is possible of course to have the results of alteration to counterbalance each other. For example, if 'a clod of air that decreases pressure through magic' is placed inside the trajectory of a compressed air bullet the compression cannot be maintained. In short, the magic has been neutralized. This phenomenon is called magic counterbalancing. If one's interference power is greater than their opponent's then it was possible to calculate magic that would blot out the blowback phenomena alteration but, if the interference power is only a little higher than, the restoration power would overcome the counterbalancing effect.

However, in order to effect magic counterbalancing on purpose then, you had to correctly predict the magic that would be used including the coordinates of the event modification. Counterbalancing magic effects was an 'easy to say, hard to do' technique.

"A guy whom a magic won't work on if he's seen it once? How cool."

"A guy who won't let any magic he's seen once get by him? How cool."

Although Leo said it like it was a joke in a jesting tone, he knew enough to recognize it was a high level skill.

"Hahaha, for that reason Minakami-senpai is really much better at theory."

While Mikihiko joined Leo in laughing at his childish joke, his answer did not really answer the question. Erika was the one who offered an answer to the question, did Carey really need a guard.

"In short, Minakami needs a tank to take the first hit of magic."

"Oh. Got it!"

Both Erika who had never let go of the idea of a 'meat wall' and Leo who had just gotten the concept now

"Erika-chan…..Leo-kun."

got pierced by the cold glare of Mizuki.

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The switch in public mass transit to small individual vehicles was not limited to trains. It had become normal in metropolitan areas to use an AI taxi to go between one's own home and the neighborhood station. When going to the station from their homes, citizens ID were used to call a commuter to their home; when returning home from the station, they caught an empty car in the commuter boarding zone. On street corners without a commuter boarding zone, you could use a smartphone to access the public transit network to summon the nearest empty car.

Tatsuya's household acted typically for their area, They used commuters to and from their home and the station. If they could have used magic then it wouldn't be necessary, however, the legal restrictions on the use of magic were unfortunately excessive. Modern society was still not that tolerant toward magicians.

Tatsuya, Miyuki and Minami, all worked very late on preparations for the Thesis competition and were just now waiting in front of the station for a commuter to come under a purple stained sky.

It was not unusual for there not to be an empty car in front of the station. It just meant that there were not more commuters in use than were needed. In short, it would be a worldly excess.

Besides, the allocation of commuters was linked to the cabinet operation, Waiting over 5 minutes was rare. In short, enough were provided so that users would not feel it was inconvenient.

Actually, Tatsuya and the rest had only been waiting around 2 minutes. They had already entered a request for a commuter into the dedicated line in front of the station. Tatsuya and the others were pausing temporarily in the waiting zone about 10 meters away from the off-loading zone where a male had apparently been dropped off in the zone about 30 seconds before. The door automatically closed, Tatsuya watched the cab slowly near the parking lot without moving onto the road---and placed his right hand in his pocket where he was hiding his CAD.

Minami looked up at Tatsuya's face with startled eyes, flustered she turned her eyes to the commuter. At the end of her line of sight, before the door of the stopped train's door opened, a psion wave emitted from within the train car.

Before Tatsuya took out his CAD, Minami erected a cylindrical heat-resistant barrier against physical objects. The objects of her protection were herself and Miyuki. She had not put Tatsuya inside the barrier because it would hinder his movements. This was the result of half a year's practice.

However, the deluge of the psion wave from inside the car was not meant to activate magic.

it was to chaotically broadcast an overlapping echo of psion noise. It did not have an obstructing effect on magic like cast jamming. Instead, the density which was slightly higher than cast jamming was high enough to hamper the ability to perceive magic and discern psions. It would probably be appropriate to call it a psion smokescreen.

(An artificial spirit self-destructed!? Like a psion time-bomb!)

Miyuki and Minami were thrown into confusion by the unexpectedness of this type of surprise attack; Tatsuya saw through the nature of this attack at once.

(If this is a magical smokescreen then the next move)

"Minami, 'Downward Whirlwind'."

"Ye-Yes!"

Minami activated the magic at virtually the same time as Tatsuya gave the order. A fierce spray of water arose from the rotation of the fountain----no, the water of the fountain all changed into a spray of water, instantly it was transformed to a thick fog. Afterward the area was obscured by thick fog which would unmistakably be troublesome to get rid of even by magically rousing the wind. Because microscopic drops of water under their foe's influence mingled with the air of the atmospheric current that was the target for manipulation.

Nevertheless, Minami had activated her magic before the fog reached them. Manipulating air currents with a high concentration of microscopic drops of water mixed in had a high degree of difficulty due to the fact that the target is always out of sight to the practitioner, after the shot is fired, the obscuring fog should not interfere with the magic.

As a result, swirling whirling air was drawn from the upper atmosphere down to the surface by the magic of 'Downward Whirlwind'. Minami was in the eye as the whirlwind blew around her; before the trio's eyes the obstructing fog was blown away by the whirlwind at once.

At once, they saw a small lean male blown out of the stopped commuter and meet the eyes of Tatsuya who headed up the trio. The man grasped a small crossbow in his hand, his eyes were wide with shock. It seemed that he had not anticipated the smokescreen being instantly destroyed by magic. However, being flabbergasted by the unexpected was a sign of inexperience. All it did was give your opponents an opening.

Tatsuya would not overlook that. Tatsuya adroitly bent his right leg aiming at the small man while he was temporarily defenceless.

He landed a roundhouse kick.

He knocked the crossbow out of the man's hand.

Tatsuya bent his leg and switched to a side kick.

The small man with an aching belly was sent into the commuter behind him in a bent over stance. He crashed into the train and might have hit his head; there was no sign of any attempt to stand up. His mind was too hazy or he might be unconscious.

It seemed like the safety was already off, the crossbow shot off the dart as it hit the road. However, fortunately the dart only hit the road and no one was hurt.

As his right leg hit the ground, Tatsuya felt psions waver to construct a magic sequence from his right hand side. He swiftly turned to face that direction. The spell trace was emanating from the man who had fallen by the commuter.

Tatsuya, who was about to take out his CAD this time, stalled the movement.

Before Tatsuya could respond, Miyuki's counterattack landed.

Presumably, the man had been the one to start constructing a spell first. However, Miyuki was actually the one to first activate a spell.

The man activated a spell. Tatsuya's ability to observe information bodies caught the projection of the magic sequence aimed one meter over Miyuki's head. And he also 'saw' that magic sequence fall apart without doing anything.

"Oniisama. Was that recorded just now?"

Miyuki's question referred to whether their foe's magic had been recorded by the psion wave sensors installed with the street cameras; in short, she was asking whether the excuse of legitimate self-defense had been established.

"Maybe, anyway even if it wasn't recorded, it's fine since there are witnesses."

Tatsuya's answer signaled his approval of Miyuki's attack. He was in front of the station and there were at least 4 spectators that had been aware of the psion wave of the development of the first magic sequence. Their faces were recorded in his memory. Because they were magicians they should have been able to see the exchange of blows.

As the siblings made their verbal exchange, the man released a spell for the third time.

All of it was blocked by Miyuki's interference zone.

The man begun to construct a spell for the fifth time. Not for the purpose of attacking, the spell was for escape. Their male opponent turned on his heel.

"Do not flee."

The quiet proclamation was from Miyuki. Instantly, the man faded from sight; immediately, the color returned and like a puppet whose spring was cut, he collapsed before he could move.

Tatsuya squatted by the man's flank and checked his pulse. Next, he placed his hand in front of the nose, for now he was continuing to breathe albeit weakly.

"Looks like, there won't be any after effects. Your skills have improved, Miyuki."

What she had used was a spell that lowered her opponent's body temperature and took away the ability to move one's body. Lowering body temperature by only a few degrees without inflicting after effects was a very difficult technique but, this time she skillfully spread it out over the area to keep it from being excessive. Miyuki replied to her brother's praise with red stained cheeks that said 'thank you very much'. His mind had been in such a state of confusion, he had not even assumed a defensive posture, the man's face though was horrible. The beautiful girl was getting flustered and blushing in front of the man she had left grazed, bruised and with a bleeding nose. From the bystanders' point of view, it was an extremely surreal scene.

Of course, the injuries Tatsuya had inflicted on the small man with his flying kicks were more serious. After binding his arms and legs so he wouldn't escape, Tatsuya left him on the road, hence in terms of 'brutality', Tatsuya was unmistakably in the winner's circle.

"Tatsuya-niisama."

There was no way Tatsuya would administer first aid to a person who attacked them, he quickly arose from the man's side at Minami's call.

“Please, look at this.”

“I expect it is a sacred purifying arrow.”

Tatsuya calmly muttered this while looking at the crossbow dart that Minami was holding in her hand and proffering up to him to see.

“.....do you know?”

He did not display the slightest sign of surprise but, this was probably a curiosity to Minami. The reflexive question was essentially incomplete.

“No, I just got a look at it when I sent him flying.”

Minami did not go ‘In that second!?’ in surprise. She had been raised by the Yotsuba as a maid who was a Guardian candidate. She had seen many aberrant people in the Yotsuba training course. Rather her scale of normal was set close to abnormal. For her, Tatsuya’s physical prowess was pretty much in the normal category.

Tatsuya had only glanced at it once but Miyuki examined the ‘Sacred Arrow’ closely.

“It’s used in Ancient Magic; as a tool to prevent the usage of magic?”

“To be exact, it is a tool to prevent the using of magic as an intermediary to SBs. It doesn’t have much effect on types of magic that infuse the magic sequence as a target directly.”

Hearing Tatsuya’s explanation, Miyuki canted her head

“Could they think we are Ancient magicians?”

“Unlike a genuine sacred arrow, this arrow has the ability to wound or kill when it strikes but……”

Tatsuya muttered cynically while looking at the sharpened arrowhead. The shaft and arrowhead were formed as a single object with the only distinctive trait visible the genuine bird feather used in the sacred arrow; all the other features appeared to be normal for a quarrel to be used in a crossbow. However, from looking at the sheer compression of wood in the shaft, charms (Shingon, invocations) had been written on shaved wood and rolled up like a thin paper scroll and made into a compressed material.

While it was called a ‘Sacred Arrow’, it’s users were not limited to magicians connected to Shintoism. ‘Text’ was a commonly used medium for spell tools among ancient magic users.

"Like I thought his hypothesis is that our offensive spells use SB magic. If he did not attack us because he mistook us for someone else then for some reason we've been mistaken for ancient magicians."

At that point, Tatsuya notices a voice saying 'Police' nearing them.

"Let's return to this topic later."

The incident had occurred in front of the station closest to their home. There were numerous witnesses and the street cameras had also recorded everything. Running away would be idiotic.

Thinking of the time in which he would be held for questioning, Tatsuya let out a huge sigh.

The police released them about one hour later. Even so, that could be said to be rather quick. From the start, their status as victims had not been doubted; as expected, this was due to the data from the street cameras and psion wave sensors.

"Aw nuts, it's so darn late."

Looking only at the time, it couldn't be really called 'late' yet. However, the psychological fatigue made it feel like the time was much later.

That was true for more than Tatsuya.

"You are right….I should start preparing dinner immediately."

Fatigue also coated Miyuki's voice as she replied.

"Miyuki-oneesama, that's my job."

Minami's tone of voice was also strangely dull. Even so, she steadfastly proclaimed her kitchen rights either from stubbornness or diligence. Probably, from both.

"Really? Then, please do so."

"Got it."

While Miyuki easily surrendered with a feeble look, Minami went and stood in the kitchen without changing clothes.

"Oniisama, I have to prepare for tomorrow."

However, she turned around in surprise at the next statement. Minami's face had a slightly sour cast. Tomorrow was the day, they would visit the Kudou house in Ikoma. She was between a rock and a hard place with regard to her duty : "It was only an overnight stay but, shouldn't she be helping with that as a maid?", "However, I have to get started on dinner immediately…"

"You probably don't need to hurry so much. How about both of you change? It will be alright if you wait til after dinner to prepare for tomorrow."

"Yes, Tatsuya-niisama. We will do it that way."

For Minami who was in dire straits, Tatsuya's words were a lifeline.

"It's a directive from Tatsuya-niisama. Let's do as he says, Miyuki-neesama."

She did not give Miyuki time to speak up, Minami shooed her mistress to the second floor.

In the end, Miyuki and Minami only shared the preparations for the trip that were for Tatsuya; the pair took care of themselves afterwards. While he watched the excited pair merrily exchanging demurrations in front of his own closets, Tatsuya only made a 'it's inevitable' smile.

And later, Tatsuya begun discussing the recent attack with the pair when they sat for their postponed tea time in the living room.

"Those guys just now were unmistakably ancient magicians. Not just the Sacred Arrow but the spell cast on that guy to let him escape, the transparency transformation spell did not interfere by light reflection or light refraction; it was mental interference magic that made recognition of one's own existence trivial. It is the same type of magic that Kudou Retsu used at last year's Nine Schools competition's opening ceremony."

"Then it is someone under the thumb of the Kudou clan?"

Tatsuya shook his head at Miyuki's question.

"A Kudou clan practitioner would not mistake us for Ancient Magicians. Rather, they are probably underlings of 'the Traditionalists' who are fiercely hostile to them."

"The 'Traditionalists' that Fumiya spoke of …… That's an extremely grandiose name but, what on earth kind of tradition are they advocating?"

Miyuki canted her head in puzzlement. Anyone who did not know of the source of the name of the 'Traditionalists' would unmistakably think that.

"There might not be a particular meaning."

Tatsuya turned his head at the scathing point Minami made with a wry smile and a 'Oh?" look on his face.

"It seems like Minami knows of the 'Traditionalists'."

"Yes. I was taught about all about them since they are one of the Magic Societies the main family has to monitor. The ancient magicians who feel betrayed by the former Lab 9 might be assembling for the purpose of avenging themselves on the Ten Master Clans."

She displayed no sign of unsurety in her manner, so she definitely knew of them as surmised.

"I think saying their goal is vengeance would be an overstatement but, the rest matches what I know."

Of course, they differed slightly in their perception but this was due to the difference in how the information was transmitted to them so it could be called inevitable.

"So then, the reason we were mistaken for ancient magicians…..Miyuki do you remember the artificial spirit that investigated our house a few days ago?"

"Yes, you mean Sunday?"

"It seems that Master's disciples caught the culprits for us."

"I see….so you mean it's because we have been mistaken for Yakumo-sensei's underlings."

Miyuki nodded with a look of understanding. However, on the other hand, Minami looked unconvinced.

"What is it, Minami-chan. You know of Yakumo-sensei of course?"

Miyuki's perceptive skills were not sharp but she noticed and 'Don't hold back to be polite, if there's something you want to ask' was implicit in her prompting.

"Yes, I know of him….but, why would Yakumo-sensei detain the magicians who were searching the house?"

The light in Minami's eyes showed her doubt went beyond simple puzzlement and into suspicion. Miyuki did not comprehend what was weighing on her mind but Tatsuya understood.

"No, Minami you are mistaken. Neither I nor Miyuki have accepted Master's patronage."

Minami would probably consider not just being taught martial arts by Yakumo-sensei but being under his patronage to be a form of betrayal of the Yotsuba clan.

"One of Master's favorite things to do is to proclaim himself more a shinobi than a monk. I dare say that as a 'Shinobi' he probably can't ignore anyone sniffing around his garden and the like. Even if he wasn't looking for them."

"It's that kind of thing?"

Apparently, she finally understood the explanation. Suspicion vanished from Minami's eyes.

"Thanks to today's attack, I know two things."

They had cleared up the odd suspicions, they were now on to the main topic.

"First, I know that we have clearly become a target of the traditionalists."

Tension ran through Miyuki and Minami's faces.

"The other thing, I know is that our enemy is unaware of our background."

Miyuki successfully suppressed her surprise but, Minami let out a small 'ah!?'.

"It's fairly certain that Fumiya and Ayako were tailed. If they know Fumiya and Ayako are 'Kuroba' then they would know that the Kuroba clan is connected to the Yotsuba clan. At the very least, Zhou Gongjin would seem to know that the Kuroba are in charge of the Yotsuba's covert operations."

Tatsuya seemed to find something amusing about this point, he made a small smile.

"Onii-sama?"

"Oh, sorry. I said 'Yotsuba's covert operations', the expression implied that the Yotsuba undertook non-covert operations and that made me smile. Pay it no mind."

Tatsuya shook away his idle thought and returned to the main subject.

"In short, while they know that our house was visited by people related to the Yotsuba clan; they don't know that we are related to the Yotsuba clan. So they think we are nothing more than magician subordinates of the Yotsuba. Since if they thought we were Yotsuba magicians then, they would not expect us to have the charms and tools of ancient magicians."

"In short….. they believe that we are ancient magicians employed by the Kuroba who are Yotsuba subordinates, right?"

This question burst out of Minami. Although it was faint, she sensed danger.

"That is the way it is. Even though they know of our existence, they don't know who we really are. They don't know why the Kuroba chose us as accomplices."

"So that….means that there is a possibility that they'll attack people other than us?"

Miyuki's eyes widened slightly at Minami's pronouncement and Tatsuya's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Right, we cannot ignore the possibility that Erika, Mikihiko or the others might become targets. There's even the possibility that Honoka or Mizuki might become hostages."

"Shouldn't we request protection for them from Obasama or Kuroba-san?"

Miyuki was relatively calm because Tatsuya was unflustered. Even so it was understood that it was an emergency situation. That the suggestion that they might rely on Maya was proffered without hesitation was proof.

"We shan't rely on Obaue. We might intend to ask for protection but, end up using them as bait"

"Then Sensei."

"I get the feeling it would be costly but…… we might have to."

Tatsuya drained the contents of his cup and stood up.

"I'm going to Master's place."

He might have intended to go there anyway to practice his new magic, Tatsuya seemed about to leave immediately. His attache case with his experimental CAD inside was already to go in the vestibule.

"Please go to bed before me. Shut the doors tightly"

He took his CAD Trident out of the vestibule storage cubby and put it on, and as Miyuki and Minami watched him put on a thin sweater, they called out.

"Understood."

Seen off by the pair speaking and bowing as one, Tatsuya opened the vestibule door.

Chapter 3

Tatsuya's weekday mornings were virtually unchanged. The night before, Tatsuya must have had some kind of discussion with Yakumo but, neither Miyuki nor Minami asked about it. However, his keeping to his usual routine somewhat assured them that he had somehow secured the safety of their friends.

However, Tatsuya himself was not at ease on the matter. Or more exactly, it was not his nature to feel at ease by only applying one layer of protection.

After school in the Student Council room. Because they had to go to the Kudou house in Ikoma at 6:00 today, Miyuki had notified Honoka and Izumi that she had private business and had to leave the rest to them.

"Shizuku"

Tatsuya called out to Shizuku who had come to hang out.

"What?"

Her reply lacked courtesy but, Tatsuya knew that Shizuku herself did not mean to be impolite and did not take offense.

"Could Honoka stay with you for a while?"

"Huuh!?"

Honoka was the one who raised her voice, Shizuku only raised her eyebrows slightly.

"Why?"

"Because it may not be safe for her to be alone"

"....uh, why would that be?"

Honoka asked with her face pale from uneasiness. Of course, Tatsuya intended to explain the reason as much as he could.

"The truth is, yesterday as we got off at the station we were attacked by someone"

"Oh my! You were not injured were you!?"

The first to jump in and speak in a loud voice was Izumi; the one she was asking was Miyuki.

"I am fine. Neither Oniisama, I or Minami received the slightest injury"

While Izumi rubbed Miyuki's smile to her chest---this was not a simile, she actually displayed the gesture, Izumi returned to her seat.

"As Miyuki said we were not injured but, we don't know why we were attacked"

That was half a lie. However, the remaining half was the truth and in this case that was the more important half.

"The police?"

"Since they have not contacted us, I believe they are still in the midst of their investigation"

"Then, do you know anything?"

"Only that it was an ancient magician"

"Only that? Any other clues?"

"It is as Oniisama stated, we do not know why we were attacked"

"Then, perhaps…"

Honoka who had listened to Shizuku's and Miyuki's exchange advanced her thinking in the direction Tatsuya wished.

"He wasn't aiming for Tatsuya personally; there's a chance that he was aiming at a member of First High's student council?"

Tatsuya didn't particularly want to scare Honoka but, in this situation, it was better if he made her wary.

“I don’t know. However, as I said earlier, I think it best to avoid being alone”

“Understood”

Shizuku placed a hand on the frightened Honoka’s shoulder.

“Honoka, from today on you're coming to my house”

“....yes, I’ll do that. I need to get my stuff, is it alright if you come with me when I go home?”

“Okay”

There might be some resistance to abruptly going over to the house to stay even though they were friends, Honoka displayed hesitation however, in the end, she appeared to accept Tatsuya’s advice and let herself be spoiled by Shizuku’s good will.

Tatsuya’s covert maneuvering did not end there.

“...therefore, we’re in a situation where we don’t know who will be targeted”

“It might be linked to the Thesis Competition and it might not be?”

He had told Miyuki and Minami to wait a little, Tatsuya was spouting the same mix of truth and lies at Mikihiko. Mikihiko, who was observing Isori’s work in the auditorium again today in the name of security, replied with questions that indicated he understood the story Tatsuya compiled.

“That’s right. Since the reason is undetermined, the targets cannot be narrowed down”

There was no sign of doubt towards Tatsuya’s words in Mikihiko’s manner. In Mikihiko’s defense, this with less naivete than because he was reacting strongly to the important matter of students of First High being attacked.

“So we should increase the guards on the representatives?”

“No, Nakajou senpai has enough people with her and the combination of Isori senpai, Chiyoda senpai, Minakami senpai, and Kirihara senpai should be avoided by most opponents”

Leo, who was listening to the pair’s conversation in silence, nodded in agreement several times.

"I am more concerned with you guys and Mizuki than them. Because you guys are the ones I am most intimate with in First High"

When he said most intimate to the two males, he looked a little bashful.

On the other hand, Erika, the sole woman in the group, was not grinning instead she looked rather stern.

"I'm fine. I do not need to tell you about Miki….Leo is probably fine as well"

"I am worried about you. After all, you're a girl too"

In a sense, he was treating her as an inferior; Leo was about to get verbally abused.

However, Erika's response differed from usual.

"That's right. It's as the idiot said, the one to worry about is Mizuki. Because in regards to combat power, that girl is nothing more than an ordinary girl"

He could have been thinking the same thing, Mikihiko nodded his agreement to Erika's point with an anxious look.

"That's right….."

".....Tatsuya kun, for the time being I'll accompany Mizuki. Would just to and from school be fine?"

Erika's plan of picking up and dropping off Mizuki herself caused each of the three males to shake their heads.

"You are a girl too, okay"

"No matter, how talented you are Erika, it's too dangerous. The opponents are ancient magicians. If they came at you from the front, I don't think you would come up short but, we don't know what kind of underhanded tricks they might pull. That's right, Tatsuya?"

"I am in agreement with Mikihiko's opinion. It's one thing if all you were doing was protecting yourself but having to protect Mizuki as well won't work, Erika"

At any rate, Leo's simplistic negative response---possibly the most effective one---combined with Mikihiko's and Tatsuya's points did not make Erika go all obstinate.

"...then Miki, you escort her"

"Eeh!"

Though, she did not forget to lob a bomb as a counterattack.

"That's right…..Mikihiko, can we depend on you?"

"Eh, no, but"

"See her to the door and back properly. Don't forget to introduce yourself to her parents. If you don't you'll be mistaken for a stalker"

"Uuu….."

He understood the necessity. However, there was strong emotional resistance. Especially to the part about 'introducing himself to her parents'.

"I will speak to Mizuki"

"Ah, take care of it"

It wasn't quite that…. his reason and emotions were at war with each other.

".....understood. it would be too late if we waited til something happened"

His awkwardness and embarrassment squashed in the name of a good cause, Mikihiko's integrity was intact.

◊ ◊ ◊

After finishing some arrangements, Tatsuya traveled to Ikoma[1] with Miyuki and Minami. They journeyed to Nara directly by train but switched into a cabinet after reaching it, since the transportation network in the Keihanshin[2] district wasn't as maintained in areas with landmark architecture or historic relevance.

Miyuki and Minami also had a favorable opinion of the linear train seats this time, so Tatsuya thought it was ok to take this kind of a transport on extended trips in the future. Meanwhile, they proceeded to the Kudou house passing through and

[1] Ikoma, Nara.
[2] Keihanshin region, encompassing Kyoto, Osaka and Kobe.

enjoying the view of the Ikomayama mountains[3] and the Mount Higashiyama foothills[4].

To this day, the 10MC have no custom for visits between clan houses. Also, it goes without saying that it's notably and frequently seen that this society limits contact between men and women of marriageable age. There's a small chance that this is the case with Tatsuya and Miyuki who have a concealed relationship with the Yotsuba family. That's why it was normal that this was the first time that they visited the Kudou residence. On the other hand, there was no chance of getting lost on the way because after leaving the cabinet station there was an automatic commuting service.

Almost as planned, their arrival time was 5:55 p.m.

After leaving the commuter, they rang the bell. On the other side of the intercom was not a servant but Fujibayashi instead.

"Welcome, Tatsuya-kun. Also, Miyuki-san, Minami-chan, thank you for coming."

"Sorry about this. We kind of wanted to accompany Onii-sama."

Tatsuya couldn't help but be grateful to Fujibayashi who promptly arrived here from Tokyo and displayed such a lively scene in their first talk.

"Don't worry about it. Come on, guys, please don't hesitate to come in."

Fujibayashi opened the gate with a smile, and invited the three of them inside.

If no one led the way, one would surely need some form of second sight ability similar to Tatsuya's to get through the vestibule. Minami kept looking around with an admiring expression. While Miyuki with a well behaved manner, fixed her eyes on her brother's back, but she was surprised with the view of a large green wall at the end of their path.

From the entrance gate of the Kudou residence to the front door, there lied a maze made with hedges more than two meters high. There probably was an entrance for cars elsewhere. Also, no doubt there were some forms of traps there, since the entrance for people was a maze with a magic-like pattern, it would be incredible for the car entrance to get a free pass.

(This residence is some kind of a fortress)

[3] The Ikomayama mountain range in Nara.
[4] Mount Higashiyama, Osaka.

Looking from the outside, it was a luxurious three-story Western-style building that seemed to have no peculiarities.

However, this mansion must have a mechanism to reject uninvited visitors who've stepped on its grounds. Or maybe it was supposed to look like a fully-fledged fortified manor combined with some military concept architecture.

"Highly impressive, isn't it?"

Fujibayashi asked with a smile and Tatsuya felt an atmosphere of admiration.

"This mansion wasn't originally built to withstand attacks from the Traditionalists. By incorporating research from the former Ninth Institute, the defenses have been strengthened in small increments. The decision to locate the mansion here had been decided by the government of that time."

Fujibayashi quizzed Tatsuya with a tone similar to with which children ask questions for a riddle: "Do you know the reason for this?" Regardless of what she expected to hear and whether he didn't know or had the correct response Tatsuya just wasn't motivated enough to play along.

"I heard that it was in order to monitor Osaka."

"It's discouraging… but that's the correct answer."

Tatsuya secretly thought "she really seems like a child", seeing the disappointed look of Fujibayashi.

"Onii-sama, what do they need to monitor in Osaka?"

The admiring expression that Fujibayashi displayed as she was asking questions was well deserved, since Tatsuya possessed more than just general knowledge. Anyhow, Miyuki was asking her brother, but only this time, Fujibayashi replied.

"Since Osaka is an international commercial city, it's more tolerant towards the dealings of foreigners and also relatively easy to settle in. No matter what, spies will always escape surveillance, and when events have already happened, it's easy to fall into a passive situation."

"In order to promptly respond to it?"

"Yes. Because the secret maneuvering of a magician spy is one of the worst nightmares for a politician. The Kudou family had the task to inhibit magicians to

free reign on foreign espionage missions as an example of best practices in the former Ninth Magician Development Research Institute."

For now, Miyuki assumed a stance of comprehension. Yet, the impression of a lingering question remained.

"Miyuki-san, don't refrain to ask whatever you need."

"Fujibayashi seemed aware of it, so she encouraged Miyuki."

"Thank you very much for your concern. I don't think it's a big deal but… I was thinking that to monitor a spy whose mission is sneaking into Osaka, shouldn't a base be established on the west side of Osaka, or at the very least not on the east side of Ikomayama?

It was a casual question that seemed to hit a sore spot for Fujibayashi.

Fujibayashi frowned and was at a loss for words. This was Tatsuya's cue to step in.

"There's danger that they'd get into trouble for being too close."

Miyuki revealed subtle surprise.

"Something like, 'betrayal'!?"

"Politicians seem to think so."

The maze was coming to an end as they saw the entrance. The topic about how politicians perceived magicians stopped without further delving into.

Kudou Retsu was already waiting in the reception room. The time was 5:59 pm. Since Tatsuya and the others weren't late, there was no intention of being apologetic, and they didn't actually feel nervous.

Against an elder of the magic world in Japan, Tatsuya's mind and body were in flawless condition as usual.

"I'd like to sincerely thank you for your time for receiving us today."

Retsu replied with a somewhat bittersweet smile to Tatsuya's 100% formal greetings.

"It's been a long time. The last time we met in person was last summer, right?"

"Thank you very much for your intervention in the matter of the electronic golden silkworms."

“It was nothing…”

Some hesitation floated in the face of Retsu. However, he overcame that in himself.

"Truthfully speaking, since you proposed this meeting, there was no obligation for me to receive you; however, I’m glad that we meet again.

“I apologize for troubling you.”

Tatsuya bowed maintaining his social courteousness by gesture to which Retsu waved to prevent him from continuing.

“Shiba Tatsuya-kun. This may be of self-satisfaction but I want to apologize first. The Parasite Doll matter was something that I conceived and planned. I don’t intend to make excuses as the loser, but I also don’t think the affair was at all wrong. However, I believe that I troubled you and caused you some grief and for that, I’m really sorry.”

Saying so, Retsu deeply lowered his head, -sitting down in a cushion sofa used in the reception room. Both Tatsuya and Miyuki watched him with a serious face, but only Minami standing behind Miyuki had eyes revealing a cold light.

“Let's just say that I’m not in a position to ask for forgiveness, but at the very least I wanted to apologize.”

"Your Excellency, please raise your head"

Tatsuya replied with a respectful voice.

“Every person does what they think is best. Even a novice such as myself understands this line of thought. At that place, I judged that I couldn't allow your excellency to perform the experiments you envisioned. However, I'm not going to deny that your Excellency's idea of unattended magic weapon development is certainly needed.”

“I'm relieved that you think that way.”

Retsu raised his head and faced Tatsuya. Then, Tatsuya and Retsu looked at each other in the eyes.

“——I heard about your mission from Kyouko.”

The conversation resumed from Retsu’s side.

“Capturing Zhou Gongjin. This is a mission from Maya…. no, Yotsuba-dono, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Miyuki gracefully sat next to Tatsuya, however, she was concealing that internally she was surprised and shaken. She didn’t expect Tatsuya to openly admit his connection with Maya, no matter the circumstances or the high probability of Kudou Retsu to know about it, even if he was to become an ally in this mission.

“Do you happen to know where the request for Yotsuba-dono is coming from?”

"No. I don’t know about it and also I think that it’s not necessary for me to know.”

“Are you satisfied with being a pawn of the Yotsuba?”

Tatsuya returned a “No” again with an unwavering poker face to Retsu’s test question (-in truth, wanna-be-attempt question).

"Mainly, it's because I found out that I shouldn't know."

Retsu only sighed, seeing Tatsuya without an appearance of overexerted words.

I see... so you’ve figured out about “that person” to that extent.

Tatsuya didn’t answer anything. His attitude was of "no comments".

“Apparently Miyuki-kun doesn’t seem to know either… No, forgive me for saying something this vague.”

Retsu sighed again, looking at Tatsuya and Miyuki in alternation.

“The 10MC are bound by the rules of the MC. In the rules, a 10MC member isn't supposed to let other 10MC conspire together. Also, they can only cooperate in emergency situations."

“Yes”

Tatsuya didn’t know the minute details of the MC rules. And he just heard of this substantial rule for the first time. He did not dare to give comments of criticism, kept his reply brief, and nodded only with short words.

“The Kudou family can't receive a cooperation request from the Yotsuba family. So I think for this matter it’s Shiba Tatsuya who as an individual asked a favor from the individual Kudou Retsu.”

“Thank you very much.”

With one voice, Tatsuya and Miyuki pronounced their gratefulness to the roundabout acceptance from Retsu.

While Miyuki showed a conservative smile, Tatsuya remained expressionless.

The meeting with Kudou Retsu was over in less than ten minutes; however, it ended up being good enough for Tatsuya. He supposedly requested assistance as an individual, but he obtained agreement of cooperation as a private associate. In the end, it was a plus that the meeting didn't extend for any longer.

Afterwards, Fujibayashi invited Tatsuya and the girls to dinner, so they excused themselves to Retsu and accompanied her. It was an informal dinner without the head of the house being present, so Tatsuya was grateful to Fujibayashi for her thoughtfulness.

The Kudou residence had several dining rooms. The three of them were guided to a room designed for young people. This didn't mean that the room was designed exclusively for children's usage, but also to let the children's parents socialize. As they were chatting, they heard a light knock on the door, as if the food already arrived.

"Come in."

Fujibayashi invited them in and the door was slowly opened.

"Please excuse us. Grandfather asked me to invite you to dinner…"

Entering the room there was a young man of an age similar to Miyuki and Minami.

Surprise was reflected on his beautiful face.

Minami held her breath with the young man's human-transcending appearance.

Even Tatsuya couldn't help but gaze at the young man's handsome looks in admiration.

In a word, beautiful, but not in the sense of female prettiness. This young man was, excusing the expression, the "ideal bishonen[5]"

Tatsuya only knew of one person that was as striking as this young man.

[5] Japanese term for "very handsome/pretty boy".

The person in question was Miyuki, the "ideal bishojo[6]", who had no comparison amongst males.

"Minoru-kun, how long are you going to stand there?"

Fujibayashi's words to the young man stunned Miyuki.

"I'm sorry!"

The young man showed an appropriately hasty diligence for his age and stepped in between Fujibayashi and the table of Tatsuya's group.

"It's very nice to meet you"

The young man began his self-introduction with a still slightly shaken voice.

"I am Kudou Minoru, the youngest son of Kudou Makoto, the head of the Kudou family. I am a first year student in the Second High School. It's an honor to meet you Shiba Tatsuya-san, Shiba Miyuki-san, and Sakurai Minami-san"

Minami was surprised upon hearing her full name and even blushed.

[6] Japanese term for "very gorgeous/pretty girl".

"Nice to meet you. I'm Shiba Tatsuya."

Tatsuya replied to Minoru and got up as a courtesy.

"I'm Miyuki, the younger sister. Minoru-san, you already knew about us, is that right?"

In a split second, Miyuki stood up and smiled to Minoru. Both Tatsuya and Miyuki introduced themselves to Minoru in a friendly manner, without being on guard.

Minoru got seriously embarrassed in front of two such people. Although he blushed and gave off an uncanny, easy to be fond of impression, the "super super" bishonen part didn't change for a second.

"I saw your accomplishments in the 9SC. Umm, also, just call me Minoru without the honorific and please don't use keigo[7] with me, because I'm your junior and I'm also happier without them."

He was as beautiful as Miyuki but in terms of character, he seemed a bit superficial and inferior to Miyuki, almost ordinary. Maybe it was because he was the younger son of the family head and hadn't received enough heir education.

"Then, I'll call you Minoru-kun."[8]

When Miyuki sweetly smiled almost grinning, Minoru averted his eyes in embarrassment.

It was finally Minami's turn.

"Please excuse my rudenes-s[9]!"

Minami stood up with a particularly dull metallic sound at the end of her speech. It's difficult to say it was suitable in the way of manners, but Minami didn't worry about it for now , and hurried to fix her introduction.

"I mean, I apologize for being late in my introduction. My name is Sakurai Minami. It is a pleasure to meet you Minoru-sama."

"Oh, yes, that's very kind of you. However, I'd prefer it if you didn't use 'sama'…"

Minoru was a bit uncomfortable in front of Minami's nervous face and stiff body.

[7] Japanese keigo or respectful attitude (courtesy/fomality) towards superiors.
[8] She didn't modify her keigo, just changed the honorific to kun, keeping her ojou-sama stance.
[9] There's a clank at the end of Minami's speech.

“Minoru-kun, unfortunately, this is in nature a custom of Minami. Will you overlook it?“

This way, Minoru didn’t strongly insist following Tatsuya’s humble expression.

“Ok. If you put it that way…”

In the end, Minoru gave in and the topic was settled.

In terms of age, Miyuki, Minoru and Minami all were 16-year olds, but in terms of grade, Minoru and Minami were first year high school students. In addition, It could be said that it was difficult for them to talk casually with each other.

“Minoru-kun… this is not a marriage meeting, there’s no need to be so tense.”

“Oh? That... I’m sorry, Kyoko-neesan.”

“You too Minami-chan… Though it’d be unreasonable to act unreservedly all of a sudden, please relax your shoulders a bit more. Being so tense can be uncourteous.”

“…… I’m sorry, Miyuki-neesama.”

Tension remained between Minoru and Minami, with their conversation cutting off. It seemed to be a situation followed by an uncomfortable air and it was hard for them to continue with an easy-going banter.

“Don’t say that, Miyuki. You have to consider that this is the first time for a 16-year-old girl to meet a male of the same age. Not being tense might be too big of a hurdle for her.”

For Tatsuya, a way to lessen Minoru’s uneasiness was coming up with pleasant banter, before a relative intervenes in front of guests.

“Onii-sama, I’m also a 16-year old girl meeting Minoru-kun for the first time. Would you mean that I'm not included in that category?”

With Miyuki’s sulking reaction, she again proved her oversensitivity to Tatsuya’s words.

“Simply, you’re not an average girl because you’re a sophisticated[10] young lady.”

[10] An ojou-sama.

“Oh, Onii-sama, the things you say…”

Miyuki easily recovered her state of mind and she put her hands up against her pale pink cheeks, while avoiding her elder brother’s eyes.

Then they heard a leaking *giggle* sound like the start of a laugh.

Minoru turned around and put both hands to his mouth in order to control himself. He felt their gazes and blushed as if he was embarrassed. Still, he couldn’t immediately stifle his laughter. And it took him about 10 seconds to somehow regain composure.

“Pardon my rudeness...”

Minoru’s expression while blushing and apologizing afforded him convincing attractiveness and gave an impression of approachability that was previously concealed.

“We as well, since my elder brother joked too much.”

Miyuki took control of the situation by imposing all of the responsibility on Tatsuya.

Hearing Miyuki’s intervention, Tatsuya made a face as if it was someone else’s business.

“No… You Shiba siblings have a very pleasant relationship, don’t you.”

“A too good of a relationship can be troublesome.”

“I don’t remember it inconveniencing Fujibayashi-san.”

Fujibayashi intervened in Minoru’s talk teasing him and Tatsuya took advantage of that.

“Anyway, I’m a bit jealous of your relationship. I rarely converse with my elder brothers due to our age differences. I also don’t have friends, either.”

“Wouldn’t you have friends in school?”

Miyuki’s question might have lacked some consideration.

"Because my body is naturally weak… I'm often absent from school."

Miyuki made an expression as if to say “my mistake”.

Minoru attempted to repel the surfacing uncomfortable air.

“But I’m feeling ok this week. Oh, I know! Will everyone stay overnight today?”

“Yes, we’re staying in a hotel near here.”

"Why not stay in this house?"

Tatsuya hesitated on how to deal with Minoru who had an air of a child left behind by his playmates about him. He had a very likeable reaction, but improper for the grandson of Kudou Retsu. Tatsuya could not duly assess if it was an act or genuine childishness.

“Minoru-kun, please don’t ask the impossible.”

Fujibayashi came to the rescue of Tatsuya and Miyuki who had trouble giving an answer.

“Ok, let’s wait until we are closer friends.”

After being lightly reproached by his cousin, -his so (ostensibly) longed sister, Minoru firmly nodded with a smile like saying “Oh, it’s like that”.

"Instead of that, Minoru-kun, what about guiding Tatsuya’s group tomorrow?"

Minoru’s reaction to Fujibayashi’s sudden proposal was faster than Tatsuya’s and Miyuki’s.

“Yes, by all means!”

“Wouldn’t that cause trouble for you?”

Most probably, Miyuki understood that Minoru had goodwill without reserve, but he was the cooperating ally they just met earlier today. Persuasively, Fujibayashi dealt with Miyuki who sensibly tried to decline the proposal.

“However, Tatsuya-kun, Miyuki-san, Minami-chan, none of you are familiar with this area, right? Although Minoru-kun’s constitution is weak; he’s not vulnerable to disease like Itsuwa Mio-san. And also the Traditionalists may be lurking around on the locations you’re going to search.”

Tatsuya’s eyes started shining sharply.

While taking note of Tatsuya’s look, Fujibayashi calmly turned to her cousin stating "Ne? Isn’t that right Minoru-kun?"

"Yes. I'm often absent from school, so I have more confidence than my elder brothers on the details about my Grandfather's work, Shiba-san."

"Please call me Tatsuya."

"Please call me Miyuki as well."

Minoru stuttered, belatedly realizing that he was calling "Shiba-san" when there were two of them, noticing that they let him know about calling them by their first names.

"Please call me Minami."[11]

At this point although unrelated Minami chimed in as well, not out of assertiveness but consideration.

"Tatsuya-san, your job is to look for a magician of the Traditionalists?"

Minoru asked the question with a serious face and definitely not out of a whim. After all, he's a 10MC magician.

"More or less, something like that."

The given answer had a nuance to make it particularly different.

"I see."

Minoru didn't ask an unnecessary question to find out what was different.

"In that case, I think I can be helpful. Kyoto is the Traditionalists base with the largest concentration of them, although, Nara can be regarded by many as the main stronghold. Tomorrow please let me guide your way."

Tatsuya considered Minoru's suggestions as very valuable. On the other hand, Miyuki and Minami had an expression of "Eh?" on their faces, so Fujibayashi decided to clear some of their doubts.

[11] Minami's keigo is stronger than that of the siblings.

"Although the Traditionalists are one large magic association, it's not a single organization, but there are at least more than ten magician groups conforming a Federation, with each group having a stronghold. As you might recall, the 10MC have up to 18 divisions included, all divided into a total of 28, right? It's the same thing here and there.

Indeed, the two girls had a face as if they were convinced.

With the end of Fujibayashi's explanation, Tatsuya wrapped up their meeting.

"Thank you for your kindness. Minoru-kun, we will be under your care tomorrow."

This was a dangerous mission where there were expectations to deliver placed on the abilities of a 16-year old young man. However, neither Miyuki nor Minami objected to this arrangement.

Not only Miyuki earnestly followed Tatsuya's decision, Minami also was indoctrinated into not interjecting on her Master's decisions or going beyond the role of a minute maid.

◊ ◊ ◊

The next day, Tatsuya and the girls checked out of the hotel early in the morning and went to the Kudou residence. They sent their luggage straight to Nara Station to increase their mobility.

Speaking about mobility, Miyuki was wearing skinny jeans which was a rare look on her. Furthermore, it was of resistant fabric more suitable for hiking than for walking around town. In addition to her pants, her top had long-knitted autumn clothing instead of a blouse. However, that didn't mean she looked plain at all. Both her top and bottom were body-fit apparel which emphasized not only her face but overall beauty, without intensely focusing on her body appeal.

Minami also matched Miyuki in that department, dressed in a knitted sweater and pants. Still, Miyuki wins in both girlish cuteness as well as feminine charm. Also, she was taller than Minami.

Just past 7 o'clock at the Kudou Residence, Minoru was waiting for the three with a face that didn't hold a trace of tiredness or fatigue.

He didn’t seem to be pretending and it can be said that his condition was fine.

“Good morning. Did you already have breakfast?”

“Good morning, Minoru-kun.”

“We’re fine, thank you. We already had one.”

Tatsuya and Minami replied in succession. As Miyuki anxiously asked a question, a small regretful look surfaced on Minoru’s face.

“Have you not eaten yet, Minoru-kun? Could it be that you were waiting for us?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Minoru hastily shook his head.

“I was thinking of inviting you to help yourselves if you hadn't had breakfast. In any case, I've finished preparations.”

“I see.”

A relieved smile spread on Miyuki’s face. Minoru timidly flustered, yet he wasn’t charmed by Miyuki’s smile.

“Anyway, come this way. I have a car prepared.”

The Kudou family’s prepared car was a limousine. This must undoubtedly be very common for them.

Though Tatsuya couldn't entirely discard the possibility of it being some form of harassment.

The driver was an elderly man. Somewhat similar to the bodyguard that Mayumi introduced to them some time ago.

Mayumi's bodyguard was certainly an extra number. Tatsuya glanced at the driver and wondered if he was the same.

Tatsuya considered the possibility of Fujibayashi driving for them. But as expected she was not available to do so.

It was unreasonable to count on her support. At that point, he also wasn’t working for the military.

So Tatsuya immediately changed his mind.

It didn't seem to be an exaggeration or a lie to say preparations were complete. Minoru stepped into the limousine, followed by Tatsuya who sat across him and Minami who sat next to Minoru. Even though Tatsuya and Minoru sat face to face, they had plenty of space for their feet. That is to say, this was indeed a true limousine.

When Minoru boarded the limousine, Miyuki saw a partially exposed general-purpose model CAD bracelet on his right wrist, because his jacket was fit to his body and the sleeve rolled up casually letting her see it. It was unusual to wear a bracelet CAD on the dominant arm (during dinner the day before, they confirmed that he was right-handed). Minoru noticed Miyuki being anxious about it, as if needing to ask him.

"What is that?"

On Miyuki's question, Minoru rolled up his left sleeve, showing that he didn't have anything on his left wrist. When he uncovered his right wrist, the CAD was revealed. Minoru then wrapped the CAD with both hands.

"99 activation sequences just isn't enough… I haven't found an engineer good enough at making adjustments suited to my style."

A generalized CAD can store 99 activation sequences. However, it could not fully cater to his ability.

"Although it's hard operating a CAD with both hands, it became easier thanks to the FLT developed thought operated auxiliary device."

"Minoru-kun, are you using FLT's fully thought operated type CAD?"

"Yeah."

Announcing that, this time he showed Miyuki a medal type CAD by pulling a chain that was hanging from his neck.

"This auxiliary device is a wonderful product. This development of Taurus Silver is no doubt genius!"

Minoru showed his longing with a dazzling voice. Miyuki nodded and expressed an "I agree" while concealing her smile. She was delighted to discuss the praises of her brother while hiding the secret of Tatsuya being Silver.

“Everyone, how much do you know about the traditionalists?”

Minoru asked the other three as soon as the limousine started moving.

A transparent shielding divided the limousine’s cabin and the driver seat. Also, voice communication could be exchanged via microphone.

The microphone light was off, but the car belonged to the Kudou family.

It seemed unlikely that someone else wouldn’t hear their conversation.

“Minami-chan and I don’t know much. What Onii-sama already told you before is the extent of it.”

In the end Miyuki thoughtfully returned a prudent answer. Retsu may have been aware of their relationship with the Yotsuba, but that didn’t mean the rest of the family knew as well.

Miyuki intuitively thought that Retsu still held a certain degree of power within the Kudou family. It was not rare for people to recognize him rather than Makoto the current head, despite being the previous head of the family.

If that's the case, it wasn't a good thing to see Minoru asking for Minami's source of knowledge.

“I heard a few things from Master Kokonoe Yakumo. Ancient magicians couldn't obtain results without depending on the participation of the former Ninth Magician Development Research Institute. Afterwards, -probably based on a misunderstanding a group of unjustifiably resentful ancient magicians irrationally united after the Institute closed.”

After Tatsuya’s words, Minoru revealed a bitter smile coated with spite and topped with a sarcastic condescending attitude. Just laughing not even raising an eyebrow of surprise. Minoru may be an owner of a “severe mentality” or possibly of cynicism matching his outward appearance.

“That is about right.”

Cutting off the conversation here would only make him an accomplice of Tatsuya.

“They claim to be 'Traditionalists', but instead of magicians who inherited genuine traditions, they should be called 'Unorthodox'. Or if putting it bluntly you could call them ‘Outsiders’”

It wasn't the first time that Tatsuya heard this information, but he merely listened to it without chiming in.

"There are some who say that Ancient magic hid in the shadows from society until the study of Modern magic got into full swing. The reason was maybe that talented magicians chose to avoid persecution, but there were circumstances where people in power didn't want ancient magic to become public. Also, magic that left no material evidence was a strong weapon in the struggle for power."

"A deadly curse, a tradition from the ancient times of the Heian period[12]? It's a common view that appears in history books now, but is there evidence of it being true?"

"At least, there's a record left of ancient magicians that participated in the former Ninth Magician Development Research Institute. Anyhow, it wasn't a literal deadly curse directly stopping life activity, but there's record of a material remote control technique to drive a target into a hallucination to commit suicide with a knife."

"Was the killing effective?"

Minami was the one who asked the question with an unyielding voice. In Yotsuba training, she hadn't experienced a long distance killing where no counterattack or resistance was possible, however she faced an incident where a partner was killed in the training process. Likewise, Miyuki had a feeling of disgust but she didn't reveal it in her expression. The only one who remained calm to Minoru's words was Tatsuya.

"The records weren't forged."

"Minami, Minoru-kun didn't explicitly answer your question, but to some extent you should have understood his answer."

Tatsuya lectured Minami but did not blame the former ninth research.

Minami had an "Oh no!" expression written on her face. Shaken, she immediately turned towards Minoru and bowed.

"I'm sorry, Minoru-sama!"

"No, I was insensitive. There wasn't a need to mention this story. "

[12] Heian period. Dynastic period (the Nara period and especially the Heian period, characterized by the rule of the emperor as opposed to the shogunate)

Remembering the feeling of guilt from the inhumane acts that his relatives were involved in still made his voice stiff.

However, Minoru had enough mental fortitude to not be taken by such sentiments.

Back to the main topic, the previous generation did such dirty work due to the requests from the authorities before the establishment of modern magic, it does not mean that everyone was involved. In fact, the ones involved in those jobs were considered a minority, and the magicians who practiced magic as an ascetic practice were also separated from those who worked for the authorities.

Instead of raising a question for the sake of advancing the conversation Tatsuya asked if there was any truth behind this.

“Yes. Famous warrior monks from Koufuku-ji and Enryaku-ji. Tatsuya as you say, after the Edo shogunate was established the violent aspects of the religious orthodox school organization were removed.”

“As you can see “sword hunts” were implemented. Strong political forces were not permitted to have armed religious forces. Of course this was obvious.”

“At the same time, although it was necessary to have an established military power and political system, we still couldn’t turn a blind eye to the use of unnecessary force.”

“The Edo shogunate government was filled with various problems from a modernistic point of view. Because certainly for a time there were lots of large scale rebellions.”

“And thus the people who lost their work and went underground are excluded."

“That is so. There weren’t many people who held the “power of Buddhism” used for combat among them.”

“Combat magicians soon went underground not casting away any of the military power they held. The previous generation’s ‘traditionalists’ gathered and challenged the authorities.”

Minoru let out a big sigh. Releasing his disdain while showing his fatigue.

“The same way the ancient magic magicians participated in the former ninth research Institute. Everyone from ninjutsu users and various onmyoji from Tsuchimikado were dispatched. Expectedly not relying on disgraceful imitations.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I think the difference is that you train to control your selfishness.”

Repeatedly blinking, Minoru replied back immediately to the question which came out as if he was speaking to himself.

In this case you would think he’d get bewildered by this, yet his appearance was a bit more normal.

“…Sorry. I didn’t mean to stray off the discussion. It appears I still hunger for conversations with people in my age group.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not like it was idle chat.”

“Thanks. Umm, now where were we? …Ahh about the birth of the Traditionalists.”

Seeing Tatsuya nod in confirmation, Minoru continued on with the main subject.

“Because of the sort of background they had, they established the traditionalist school base near where they originally came from. Rather than saying near, maybe it’s better to say in the rearguard.”

“As in near famous temples and shrines.”

“Yes, and that would be troublesome to anyone who is seriously religious.”

Tatsuya and Minoru looked at each other and briefly smiled. However, although they were similar, Minoru's striking smile that was beyond the distinction of gender couldn't be compared to that of the manlier Tatsuya’s. An atmosphere of mystery remained about the similarities between the two.

“Everyone, I think we should head back to Nara Station.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Miyuki returned a simple reply, up until now Tatsuya was focusing his attention on Minoru.

“Actually, the main base of these traditionalists is at Nara, a little further than Kasuga Shrine, since it’s close to Nara station we’ll go there last. First, we will visit Katsuragi to gather information. However, the southern part of Nara is the traditionalists’ stronghold…”

“That’s right, I’m relying on you.”

"Leave everything to me."

Minoru took the three to a walking road called "Katsuragi Kodō"[13] located at the Imperial Palace City (Goseshi), to the southwest of the Nara Basin. The most probable reason for taking this path in the middle of Ikaruga[14] was that there was no Traditionalist hideout around here.

"Katsuragi Kodo" has a boardwalk that takes approximately 6 to 7 hours to walk around with a leisurely pace, but this time they didn't have that much time. Minoru indicated that he had a limousine waiting for them at the boardwalk exit, so he proposed that they borrowed a standup-type electric robot scooter as a way to get there.

Although it's an automatic type, to ride a 1-seater robot scooter, one needs a motorcycle license (this designation hasn't changed since the last century), and a two-seat motorcycle license for driving the 2-seater type. Unfortunately, neither Miyuki nor Minami had this type of license.

No, for Miyuki it was certainly "fortunately" rather than "unfortunately", since they inevitably had to borrow two-seaters, because Tatsuya had a large two-seat motorcycle license and Minoru also had a normal two-seat motorcycle license, so the pairings would turn out to be Tatsuya and Miyuki plus Minoru and Minami.

"I apologize, Minoru-sama."

"Don't worry about it. Because I'll be the one driving".

Minoru didn't care at all that Minami wasn't as apologetic as before. Well, normal high school male students could have an impression of benefit for these situations. But without a doubt, even though not to the level of Miyuki's "pretty girl" category, boys not considering Minami as a pretty girl should be a minority. Anyhow, no matter how super, super pretty boy Minoru was, he just wasn't the unkind type.

Then, speaking of the other pair.

A two-passenger robot motor scooter is a vehicle where two passengers line up standing beside each other, the driver holds the steering wheel for maneuvering, and the fellow passenger grabs a safety bar attached to the vehicle frame.

[13] Katsuragi Kodō is an ancient path with lots of historic and archaeological remains. People go mainly to recall ancient times and strolling in an autumnal atmosphere (No Wiki link, but note that Lisa is translating the JP). Map. Pictures: 1, 2

[14] Nara Basin lies to the East of the Ikoma Mountains, contains the highest concentration of population in the Nara Prefecture.

However, Miyuki didn't hold on to the safety bar.

She circled her arms around Tatsuya's waist clinging to him.

The robot scooter of Tatsuya and Miyuki followed Minoru's. They didn't advance side by side, because Minoru was guiding, it was the natural formation and also because there's some space that had to be left between the vehicles and the sidewalk to not disturb pedestrians. Also, you can say that in this formation, Minoru and Minami didn't have to see the siblings clinging to each other. However, every time Minami looked back and checked on them, she sighed with an exhausted expression. In turn, Minoru who for the first time saw the siblings' physical contact looked undisturbed.

As such, Minami was forced to push away the mental fatigue by observing the scenery throughout the road-way.

On the other hand, if we talk about results, the search in Katsuragi-Kodō was in vain in the end. Although we say "in vain", Minoru mentioned about the high possibility that it would happen like this so there shouldn't be any disappointment. And of course, there was some time for sightseeing historic and venerable shrines with a touching aura such as Kuhonji, Hitokotonushi, and Takamahiko[15] which refreshed their souls (the reason it wasn't a search was that they explored magic from the exterior of the shrines).

Also, there was an unexpected meeting.

"Shiba-kun……?"

A young man apparently a priest apprentice who cleaned the precincts of the Takakamo shrine[16] called out to Tatsuya. The young man had a white hakama[17] and wasn't wearing glasses. Other than that, it was a face Tatsuya remembered.

"Tsukasa-senpai, it's been a long time."

It was Tsukasa Kinoe, student and those days former captain of the Kendo Club at First High School who in April last year suffered brainwashing magic by hand of the Anti-Magic Organization in the "Blanche incident".

"You remembered me… No, I caused you trouble that time. I haven't been able to properly say sorry. I sincerely apologize for that time."

[15] Kuhonji, Hitokotonushi, and Takamahiko are very well renowned shrines in the Gose (Nara) area (No ENG page, but you can always Google translate for more details).
[16] Takakamo shrine
[17] Hakama is a type of traditional japanese clothing.

He replied and genuinely lowered his head. It was a refreshing mood compared to those days.

“No, Tsukasa-senpai was also a victim…”

In reply to Tatsuya’s conciliatory words, Kinoe shook his head in disapproval.

“It's because I was weak that I allowed my path to be misled. However, I can say that I feel grateful for your kindness.”

Then, as if suddenly remembering he added the next fact in a tone without contempt.

“Also, I’m not ‘Tsukasa’ anymore. My mother divorced and took back her maiden name, so I’m Kamono Kinoe now.”

“Is that so? By any chance, is that the reason why you’ve come here?”

"I didn't get to know you so deeply, but you're really sharp[18]. Because of these eyes."

Saying so, Kinoe pointed to both of his eyes.

“You see, I didn’t know the main branch of my family until they contacted me. Later on, some complications happened, but, in the end I was able to study here.”

It wasn’t such an unexpected talk for Tatsuya if he listened to the circumstances. First, Tatsuya recalled that Yakumo mentioned before that Kinoe had an affiliation with the Kamo clan[19]. Also, the Takakamo shrine is the headquarters of the Kamo shrines[20] in Japan and also home of the patron deity of the Kamo clan. Furthermore, the case of the Kamo Clan is particularly mysterious in the world of Magic, where the main branch can take advantage of blood relatives of a non-main branch, -even branches at the far end of the main-branch, and take care of their exceptional born talent in the Takakamo shrine.

“I’m studying here as a means for expiation, to wash away all the impurity that my body got.”

“Is it like that? Kamono-senpai, please don’t say such harsh things, don’t lose yourself.”

[18] Note the Shrine name (Takakamo, 高鴨, High Duck) and his last name (鴨野, Kamono, Duck Field) have the same root (鴨, Kamo, Duck), so it’d be like a Family shrine, which is what Tatsuya notices
[19] The Kamo clan (EN,JP).
[20] There are several Kamo shrines (EN,JP) throughout Japan. In the Takakamo link can be confirmed that it’s the headquarters of the Kamo shrines. Provided both links because inexplicably the EN links do not mention the Takakamo shrine.

“Thanks. Once more allow me to apologize again.”

After saying so, Kinoe bowed deeply once again and returned to cleaning the precinct.

Tatsuya left the precincts with the intention of not disturbing him any longer. He returned to the place where the robot scooter was without saying anything about what just happened, but Miyuki was the first to talk.

“Onii-sama, I’m glad you’re ok.”

"Yeah…"

Honestly, Tatsuya wasn’t too concerned about Kinoe and hadn’t remembered about him until they met in the shrine. However, Tatsuya, who suffered the curse of magic, felt a breath of fresh air with the manifestation of this young man’s effort to try to return to the right path without having to break his relationship with magic, since he could have had his life distorted because of magic.

After leaving Katsuragi Kodō, Minoru guided the group by the Kashihara shrinetowards the Ishibutai Kofun tomb of the Amanokaguyama mountain. The idea was to lead them to the Traditionalists’ base, supposedly around this place, but the search ended in failure and turned out to be only sightseeing.

Then, four people arrived to the Nara Park at 3 p.m.

“Is there a magic association base in this town?”

“They say that inside the Mikasayama mountain there is a large-scale base that could be one of the traditionalists’ bases”

“Mikasayama is a sanctuary, -better yet, a worship object, wasn't entering forbidden except for sightseeing through the limited scenic route?”

“The Traditionalists might think that this place is suitable for them because it’s a holy place and people don’t approach it. But, don't you think that one who properly conveys magic has the qualifications to receive God’s blessing?”

“Understood. A tree is best hidden in a forest, I think… Please continue your guidance.”

Always led by Minoru, the four got off the limousine and begun to walk towards the intersection of the ways to Todaiji[21] and Kasuga-taisha[22] through the Kasugayama boardwalk. Until the 21st century, there was a driveway through this mountain path, but in this era, there was only a sidewalk. This was because with the development of science and magic, the "fear" for holy objects began to revive. Is it possible that there was something left out of the scientific resolution that might have existed to help regain the piety of the heart? As an ancient greek philosopher said: “I do not think I know what I do not know"[23].

The four walking in order, first, Minoru, leading, next, Tatsuya and Miyuki, behind Minoru, and Minami in the rear, one-step behind the others. But it was only when they passed the Ukigumo Shrine[24], a subordinate shrine of Kasuga-taisha, that Tatsuya and Miyuki began the mentioned formation.

For no particular reason. Also, it can be daringly said that Minoru started paying regard to Minami.

“Ara, what a lovely shrine.”

"It can’t be said at all that size does not matter, since when having the necessary appearance to deify a god, size is a great asset. It's because God has already decided the height and the weight."

“Heh, the things you say Onii-sama. Isn’t that a bit disrespectful?”

“Is that so? Anyway, I'm not going to lie to myself to please God.”

“Fu fu, let's leave it at this.”

The siblings conversed playfully while they walked. Additionally, the sister’s arm held the brother’s arm firmly, and the distance between the two was approximately zero. If Minami was watching in the back, this would have made her very much say profanities.

It was embarrassing to look. It wasn’t that they appeared immoral or unsightly, but just watching caused blood to rush up her face, and her body get hot. Still, she couldn’t just separate from them. She looked down and endured the penance.

Minoru noticed Minami’s troubled appearance, and moved to walk beside her.

[21] Todaiji shrine houses the world's largest bronze statue of the Vairocana Buddha.
[22] Kasuga-taisha is a Shinto shrine in the city of Nara, (Nara Prefecture) famous for its many bronze and stone lanterns that lead up the shrine.
[23] The Socratic Ignorance
[24] Ukigumo Shrine

"Is this here also Edanomiya[25] of Kasuga-taisha?"

Whether they knew of Minami's condition or not-- the possibility being high they did and had left her alone for that reason-- the siblings cheerfully continued their conversation.

Yes. There are two shrines[26] where deities are worshipped in Edanomiya, the Atago Shrine where the deity is Kagutsuchi[27] who will protect with outstanding virtue for fire, and the HijiriAkira Shrine, well known because copper were first extracted here in Japan.

"Deities in Kasuga-taisha include: Takemikazuchi no Mikoto-sama[28], Futsunushi-sama[29], Ame-no-Koyane no Mikoto-sama[30], Himegami-sama[31], right? That reminds me… Aren't these four deities the same as Yoshida-kun's parents' house, too?

"No, I think the one you're talking about is the Yoshida shrine, but it's because its name is the same as Mikihiko's family name, right?, But they're unrelated. Also, his house isn't a shrine."

"Oh. Is it like that?"

"Yes. It also isn't a religious corporation. Mikihiko's parents' home is a private school for the study of magic."

"…Oh, this is embarrassing. I was wrong this whole time. Onii-sama, next time please hurry and teach me sooner."

Miyuki sulked with a pampered voice.

Even with some reproaching glares around, the distance between Tatsuya and Miyuki didn't change.

Minami kept her gaze to the ground so she wouldn't have to face the demeanor of those two, and also endured her desperate desire to block her ears.

Next to them, Minoru watched Tatsuya and Miyuki and their aspect seemed to be heartwarming.

[25] Edanomiya Shrine, another subordinate shrine of Kasuga-taisha.
[26] The information on these 2 shrines can also be found here.
[27] Kagutsuchi, fire deity who burned to death his mother Izanami during childbirth.
[28] Priestess of Takemikazuchi god
[29] Futsunushi god
[30] Priestess of Ame-no-Koyane god
[31] Himegami god

Patience time was over for Minami in front of the boardwalk entrance.

Suddenly, Tatsuya stopped and lightly shook his left arm which Miyuki was leaning on and she released it immediately.

Tatsuya wasn't the only one who sensed an impact.

Minoru was slightly late in detecting it, openly looked around to the right and left with wariness and with eyes dyed by a tender color, embracing a penetrating light.

The day was Sunday. A large number of tourists were also besides Tatsuya's group in the vicinity of a branching point that leads to the Kasuga-taisha Shrine.

But now, Tatsuya's group were the only ones left there, and little by little a silhouette was drawn from the boardwalk up to the entrance.

"It's… a Barrier of Mental Interference Magic"

Tatsuya muttered,

"Is it an enemy?"

Miyuki perceptively asked back Tatsuya while carefully watching the surroundings. Minami imitated that next to Minoru.

Tatsuya noticed that Minoru also seemed to have sensed some abnormality.

Odd thing that neither Miyuki nor Minami questioned why the silhouette was unnaturally disappearing. Particularly, Miyuki who has solid tolerance to mind attacks due to possessing Outer Systematic Mental Interference magic of the strongest class.

Minoru had the answer to that question.

"The casters of the barrier appear to be of high-level. They seem to have narrowed the magic output down to a minimum to make them barely unnoticed."

In the modern magic era where magic is used only for short moments, activating magic unconsciously showed a poor control of magic. With the development of activation sequence that specifically promoted the control of magic, the activation timing had been reduced much.

But magic technology to hide magic activation entirely exists only as an individual skill.

Even If the magic power of the opponent is high, Miyuki has a higher power to invalidate phenomenon interference. However, without noticing, this time she was being gradually led to have some weak judgement due to circumstances where she actually got played into the opponent's resistance.

"It looks like this kind of technique is pretty common in Ancient Magic."

"Because we modern magicians give great importance to the ability to properly use various methods to support various situations, unlike ancient magicians who tend to maximize the value of magicians with special and unusual techniques."

"It seems the reason for this is the development of the use of special magic combined with secondary techniques."

Minoru's knowledge was helpful for Tatsuya in various ways. Especially, concerning knowledge about the Ninth Magician Development Research Institute on Ancient Magic, it was refreshing to hear a somewhat different perspective than the orthodox magic knowledge from Yakumo or Mikihiko. Tatsuya wanted to have an exchange of arguments in some more ways to draw knowledge, but unfortunately, this wasn't the time to do this.

"However, for Tatsuya-san to have noticed this technique so quickly, it has been a huge miscalculation from them, hasn't it?"

Immediately after Minoru said that, there was a sound of leaves shaking in the forest close to them.[32]

"It looks like they are very confident about their 'Invisibility'."

The hostility that had been concealed until now revealed itself as a shape of four people surrounded them.

"I know where they are, I'm going to commence my attack."

Minoru daringly voiced aloud this declaration, as a provocation for the enemies that surrounded them.

It was a question of whether the opponent was short-tempered or if it was meaningless to hide any further.

[32] ザワリ (zawari) is a SFX for moving leaves in a forest.

"Minami!"

"Yes!"

At the same time Tatsuya ordered Minami to build a barrier, a silver light emerged to the surface.

The source of the silver light that bordered outside the defense wall was either a thick needle or a tiny arrow like a metal dart bullet emitted by magic (a Flechette bullet)[33].

After doing preparations to generate defense magic at any moment, Miyuki looked for the position of the archer. However, when she found out the location, Tatsuya was already on the other side of the trees.

Subsequently, a scream broke out. It was a cry of pain due to a hole drilled in the body by Tatsuya's Partial Decomposition.

Miyuki thought that it was all right to leave that side to her elder brother and set up magic in the opposite direction.

Psion fluctuation, that is, signs of magic activation occurred right over the heads of Miyuki and Minami. Miyuki remembered seeing this many times, since it was like Mikihiko's speciality of lightning SB magic. However, it disappeared instantly because of Tatsuya's speciality of Combat Magic Information Body Decomposition: Gram Dispersion.

"Onii-sama, everything is alright here!"

In order to prove her own words, Miyuki expanded her Zone Interference. At first, she set up a field[34] around her merely as a thin cylindrical layer, to not affect the magic of Minami and Minoru. Then, she stretched the force field pillar to the top and little by little widened it laterally and into a height that continued not disrupting those two. Then, she solidified the circular force field immediately under the surface level towards the bottom of the pillar. Thus, in less than a second, she built a Zone Interference field in the shape of a huge cocktail glass where offensive magic wasn't allowed at all from either the sky or the underground.

"Amazing! It's like the Holy Grail."

Minoru revealed an exclamation, better yet, an impression of amazement. However, he wasn't only appreciating Miyuki's magic. He was walking apart from the side of

[33] A Flechette is a pointed steel projectile with a vaned tail for stable flight.
[34] Remember Zone Interference refers to set up a field for countering magic.

Miyuki and Minami towards an opposite direction from where he heard a scream of an assailant who was shot by Tatsuya.

But before anything else, Minami tried to stop Minoru's reckless independent action. She thought something like courteously telling him to do it as Tatsuya, who at least quickly moved to the enemy's side instead of walking slowly to the front as he was doing it.

Except that Miyuki prevented her from trying to stop Minoru. She held Minami's arm who was going to raise her voice, and with an unexpectedly gentle rejecting gesture with her head signaled Minami that it was unnecessary.

Minami knew the reason immediately.

There seemed to be two types of enemy magicians. Ancient magicians not concerned with sticking to tradition who adopted the concept of an armed built-in modern magic CAD that fires a physical weapon called "Flechette" bullet. And traditional ancient magicians who set up attacks with SB Magic enslaving Independent Information Bodies using Consciousness-Induced Outer Systematic Mental Interference Magic.

Tatsuya countered the former type of magician and Minoru headed towards the side of the hiding traditional magicians. The enemy didn't understand Minoru's aim and got momentarily confused, but recovered immediately and concentrated intense attacks on him. Maybe they noticed the hateful lineage of the Kudous, whatever it was, Miyuki and Minami were completely forgotten.

However, all enemy magic was unsuccessful. Wind, fire and sound magic went through Minoru and dispersed without exception leaving no damage at all. Also magic that could cause direct injury or inner wounds all failed due to the absence of a target.

"Is it an illusion? I can't believe it…"

Minami's mutter was by no means exaggerated. A magician doesn't have to be Tatsuya to be able to perceive psions like physical light and sound. The body of Minoru which got reflected into Minami's line of sight had the exact same psion pattern as the real body which was walking next to her until now.

In other words, according to magical senses the person was certainly there.

"Parade. The technique of the Kudou Family that incorporates elements of Ninjutsu."

With her comment, a shiver beyond praise dwelled in Miyuki's voice.

“Even so, this is amazing… This precision is better than Lina’s.”

“When you say Lina, you mean USNA Stars High Commander, Angie Sirius?”

“Yes. That Angie Sirius. Angelina Kudou Shields. We call her Lina. She’s a gentle and lenient child a bit inappropriate for military personnel, but her magic capacity didn’t shame the name of a Stars High Commander. However, Minoru-kun is technically superior to her, at least with respects to Parade. I have to say that the Kudou Family is the home of such powerful descendants.”

How would Minoru feel once he heard Miyuki’s last remark? Maybe he’d feel praised with “honor”, or he’d be embarrassed and say “I’m still far from it”, or he’d express modesty and say “Powerful descendants, that's really out of the question”. Or rather he’d be shocked that he was being watched. Anyway, he volunteered to be the guide out of pure courtesy, so he wouldn’t do anything against Miyuki or the others.

Fortunately, Minoru didn't hear Miyuki’s last remark. His consciousness was 100% focused on enemy neutralization.

An activation sequence started on Minoru's right hand and it was absorbed in a moment. Due to the use of a perfect thought-operated type CAD, no buttons were pressed, which shouldn’t give any surprise once that is known. There should be a special mention of the activation sequence reading speed, which even if it’s estimated conservatively, it should be comparable to the speed of First High School former student council president Saegusa Mayumi.

However, it was still early to be surprised.

Without leaving an interval to be shocked about the activation sequence processing speed, Minoru released his magic.

With one step of his, the ground started emitting light. This was the Dispersion Systematic Magic "Spark". A fundamental technique that forces out electrons from a substance and causes an electric discharge phenomenon. The magic target is usually the air molecules within a narrow range from the substance. Although ionization of this nature is a relatively common phenomenon, it requires a very high interference power because the magic affects the substance structure altering it. Also, ordinary magicians have a low density of ionization, that is, the best they can produce is a small number of molecules within a certain volume of gas in a very limited range from the substance.

And then, when the activation was almost fully in sight he fired against the ground surface.

So, this “Spark” has an electrical discharge range broader than the combination magic "Slithering Thunders"[35] that the former Club Management Group Chief Hattori Hanzou is strong at. Moreover, as for the degree of difficulty, “Spark” is a better technique, despite Hattori’s magic applying conditions like using a frictional static electricity discharge.

(Above Hattori-senpai and comparable to Saegusa-senpai!?)

As Miyuki watched the scene, she forgot to cast support magic.

Tatsuya looked at Minoru’s magic with admiration as it neutralized half of the magicians that surrounded them by forming what can be said as being a semicircular shape.

In the same way, Miyuki was impressed as well about how Minoru made ‘Spark’, which requires strong phenomenon interference power to act on many target objects. But, Tatsuya was really paying attention to the fact that the purpose for this wide area ‘spark’ wasn’t only for preparing to bring the enemy into the open.

When ordinary magicians, -no, even when first class magicians lacked interference strength, their magic would fail on activation as a consequence. In that sense, It was soon proved before Tatsuya’s eyes that Minoru was an owner of the sort of magic power that corresponded to such extravagant tactics.

To stop the electric current from crawling up their footing, the enemy magicians used defense techniques. In modern magic, special conditions for the activation method need to be prepared in advance when using a CAD to invoke magic for a

[35] Remember that Slithering Thunders is a magic that Hattori used in Vol 4 (Ch 13, Part 3).

detected attack in order for the magic to have the correct timing. Most probably, the SB magic uses a disposable artificial spirit causing a phenomenon modification to cancel out the "caster's detected magic phenomenon". Tatsuya guessed this ancient rite magic was called "Oniyarai-jutsu"[36].

In this case the real nature of the opponent's magic wasn't important.

Magic was activated automatically, namely, "Invisibility", which was a magic stealth technique. Where the enemy was hiding was clear to Tatsuya even without the use of Elemental Sight. However, neither Miyuki nor Minami knew, and of course not even Minoru who caused this situation did.

Minoru's Activation Sequence in his left hand expanded and his arm absorbed it. He had mostly mastered the perfect thought-operated type CAD. It's a good thing for developers, but when considering that only two months have passed since the new product was first sold, in a sense Minoru's ability can't be helped but to be thought of as terrifying.

An electric current flowed from where Minoru pointed at. It formed neither a luminous phenomenon or any sound of dielectrical breakdown[37], but Tatsuya who used his exceptional talent of information body recognition "watched" it. Minoru's magic produced the same effect as creating an outside interference on an electric current from his body and then poured it inside the enemy magician.

The sound of a human breaking down arrived to Tatsuya's ears. This was the result of an enemy magician being attacked by Minoru receiving an electric shock and losing control of his body.

The body of a magician is protected from the magic of others with an information reinforcement defensive wall that unfolds unconsciously. This does not change even for Ancient Magic magicians. In this case, Minoru broke through the defensive wall easily and directly triggered magic onto the enemy.

Even with the magic Rupture, which Ichijou Masaki was good at, it was difficult to break through an information reinforcement defensive wall in an instant. Tatsuya didn't witness the scene himself, but knew about it because of a detailed battle report about the Yokohama incident.

Minoru's forte is Dispersion Systematic Magic with Electricity Interference, that is, electronic exercise and distribution. As the circumstances show, this magic is

[36]追儺術 (Oniyarai-jutsu) = Chant to chase evil spirits away.
[37] Dielectrical breakdown: Rapid reduction in the resistance of an electrical insulator when the voltage applied across it exceeds the breakdown voltage resulting in a portion of the insulator becoming electrically conductive.

Minoru's specialty, so it can't be established that Minoru's interference power exceeds Masaki's. On the other hand, Minoru has managed to fuse the Ancient Magic and Modern Magic in a technique called "Parade" and that's why his ability can be said to equal Masaki's Modern Magic.

People fell in succession wherever Minoru pointed his vision.

As for the enemy attacks, they couldn't catch any substance from Minoru.

Did the enemy finally realize the difference in ability that should have called a change in the status quo? The only thing that could be seen was the shape of the shadow of one magician that hid.

He didn't surrender, because he still held his magic charms. He showed his stance expressly, so he didn't escape. It was a posture to unveil a desperate attack, or rather an all or nothing.

Of course, Minoru's eyes faced that man.

It can be unfair to call it neglect. Minoru just wasn't granted more chances to fight, because of his ailing body, even though his talent was at the very highest level.

The enemy that held the charms was defeated by Minoru's magic

At the same time almost simultaneously, a small shadow besides the bushes rushed closer to Miyuki rather than Minoru.

It wasn't a magician. It was an extremely agile four-legged beast and considerably smaller than a human.

"A Kanko!?"[38]

Whether Minoru's voice called for Miyuki's attention or reflexively expressed surprise, if it was for a warning, it was already too late. Right then, the small beast was to bounce upon Miyuki with clear malicious intent.

Miyuki watched the beast that was going to attack her without blinking her eyes.

"Miyuki-sama!"

Minami was the one that moved in at that moment.

[38] Kanko is a creature that resembles a fox spirit familiar.

With the object shield that Minami set up she sensed that something had slipped through it rather than broken it and acted on reflex.

Then, in order for Miyuki's body to be covered, Minami served herself as a shield for her Master.

That said, Miyuki is taller than Minami. For Minami to cover Miyuki, it has to be in the form of "jump and push down".

It'd be unthinkable that Miyuki could have had a fragment of expectation that Minami would come forth with this behavior and had turned her back over

"Miyuki!"

Tatsuya cried out with an impatient voice. But soon after, he regained composure.

Minami rushed to look at what was underlying Miyuki to catch an unexpected view of something entirely frozen.

What was displayed before Minami's eyes, -and not being a metaphor, was the iced up body of a long small knocked down animal.

"It huuuurts…… Minami-chan, quickly move back, please."[39]

Minami stood up in a hurry upon hearing that voice. Miyuki's voice didn't have anger at all, but Minami almost had a panic attack.

"As expected of Miyuki. Splendid reaction you had there."

Tatsuya approached and held out his hand to Miyuki.

Miyuki happily grasped her elder brother's hand, and got up with a move that hardly made her feel any weight.

"I'm Onii-sama's little sister after all. I must be able to do this much."

Neither Tatsuya nor Miyuki seemed to catch sight of Minami who almost fainted with strain.

Meanwhile, Minoru neutralized all remaining enemies.

[39] Miyuki actually does say "please" but she uses the less polite form like when you address your employees in Japan.

Tatsuya left the side of Miyuki and Minami for a moment to search the pockets of the enemy they defeated. However, Tatsuya didn't find any clues to his identity by looking at his belongings. The search didn't depend on reason so much, so he wasn't disappointed. He just returned to the two girls with a nonchalant look.

Minami and Miyuki kept exchanging lines such as "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" vs. "It's ok, I'm not worrying about it." and " I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,....." vs. "It's really ok, I won't worry about it any more". Tatsuya judged that a little more time was necessary until Minami could calm down and paid more attention to Minoru who walked to where he was. Tatsuya was going to thank him for his assistance, but the one who talked first was Minoru.

"It's amazing, Tatsuya-san. To think that you completed the enemy cleanup in such short time."

Tatsuya had a hard time trying to suppress a bitter smile.

"No, Weren't you the one who was amazing? My part was only to be available for surprise attacks, but you brought forth all of the hiding enemies and had them under control."

"If I say that, I'd be doing a disservice. Would you happen to know about 'Parade'?"

"Yes. But a certain person must be wondering, why do I know of the existence of 'Parade' and about it".

"It's a secret."

Minoru answered so promptly and with an expressive smile that had no malice to it. Maybe this was already known, but Tatsuya thought he had a face like an angel and also a good personality.

Meanwhile Tatsuya thought that he would likely get criticised by strangers for saying words like "You don't say" but then he decided to change the subject before falling into the loop of humbly complimenting each other.

"By the way, how long does it take to the Traditionalists' base from here? We haven't spent too much time in battle, but now that an ambush was set here, the enemy can expect us to know of their hiding place. But even if we go now, I don't think there'll be any clues left"

"Yes. In addition, we can't leave them here unattended."

“Onii-sama, isn’t it better for us to depart soon? We still have plenty of room to catch the train but being seen in this place at this hour, for too long won’t do us any good.”

Miyuki called for Tatsuya’s attention even if the reason wasn’t being jealous of Tatsuya and Minoru interacting on good terms.

“Yes, that’s correct. We’re done here today, right?”

“Oh, well, here I am…. Ahem, I know that I should mind my own business but, around what time is your return ticket?”

“It’s for 10:30 p.m. We still have 3 hours.”

Because Tatsuya intended to take more time searching, he got the return tickets for a reasonably later time. -By the way, the system called ticket always changes form but still exists in this era.

“So, what would you say about going to an Onsen (hot spring)?”

“Onsen……?”

Listening to the conversation, Miyuki suspiciously furrowed her brow. Next to her Minami secretly-- but actually in plain view-- tugged her collar to check her body odor.

The implication was clear. Minoru was worried he had stepped on a landmine.

“N-no, it’s not that you two are dirty or smell at all”.

Miyuki gave Minoru a piercing look. That look was the same as “the moon in the water”[40].

Minoru’s entire body became stiff. The dignified fight of minutes ago seemed just pretense now.

Tatsuya perceived himself as having to pull someone's chestnuts out of the fire and only sighed in his mind.

“Minoru, that’s suicide.”

First Tatsuya stopped Minoru to prevent him from unknowingly extending the damage.

[40] The mirror of the water-moon image has JP literary-cultural allusions rooted in the three Divine Treasures: Mirror, Sword, and Jewel. Miyuki makes reference to the mirror which suggests a meaning of "unstained mind", "source of honesty" and "hiding nothing". See more here

"Miyuki, Minami as well, please calm down. Minoru only suggested taking a bath in the Onsen to heal our fatigue from the battle."

Beside them, Minoru was speechless of the way that Tatsuya persuaded the younger sisters with a strong tone.

"I think it's not a bad idea. What will you do?"

"….If Onii-sama says so…"

Although not looking entirely convinced, Miyuki nodded, while on the other hand a dangling light of expectation was reflected in the eyes of those who would be charmed by her in the Onsen.

Maybe Minami was embarrassed sitting next to Miyuki, because she held her sweater by the neck with her right hand.

Minoru led the party to an Onsen location that was on a well-established hotel not far from the Heijōkyō ruins[41]. It can be said that, he was guiding instead of escorting, as Tatsuya firmly insisted Minoru to be in that position, so in case of a surprise attack the party could flee leaving Minoru fighting alone. Surprisingly, Minoru's personality was one that could be compelled.

If Minoru hadn't gone with them, Tatsuya would have been in a position of getting dragged into a family bath with Miyuki. It's not that he didn't want it, but it was inconceivable to be with the two girls alone in such a place.

In fact, Tatsuya wanted to talk a bit more with Minoru.

Then, without entering the hot spring in the hotel Tatsuya and Minoru stayed in the guest room facing each other across the tatami-room table[42].

"So Tatsuya-san, what do you need to know about the "Kanko"?

"I'm surprised. You have splendid insight."

Tatsuya praised Minoru quite earnestly so Minoru took it as a compliment.

"No, I just don't remember blurting out any other words that could have sparked Tatsuya-san's interest."

[41] Heijokyo: Ancient capital city of Japan during most of the Nara period (710–740).
[42] tatami-room table: Small low table widely used in Japan.

Tatsuya just praised what was the absence of perceptiveness and chose to not voice it again. He also decided to delve into the main subject.

“What kind of existence is this ‘Kanko’? It's impossible not having seen or heard about a creature that holds seamless substance and that appears in the shape of a fox. Also, no ordinary being is able to slip through Minami's guardian barrier.

For just a brief moment, hesitation was reflected on Minoru’s eyes

“You already know about the ‘parasites’, right?”

“Yes. You know about them, too?”

“Yes. In short, this ‘Kanko’ is a familiar created with the same principle as ‘parasites’”

“The same principle…? Is it embedded in the independent information body of the beast?”

“Yes. Just after an animal is killed, they extract the information body and create an artificial spirit. This new young parallel beast… -better said ‘Familiar’, is created with the magical ability of the parent embedded. It seems to be an unexpectedly popular ancient magic technique.”

“So then, this ‘Kanko’ is surely some kind of created ‘Familiar’?”

“Yes. But Tatsuya-san, is that really what you wanted to hear?”

Minoru seemed to emit an air of malice. He really didn’t appear to have participated in the harboring of the parasites. He gave the impression of being cautious and of only expecting to receive questioning from Tatsuya on the method of breeding parasites. Maybe it was misunderstood that there was an increase of parasites, and with that, more humans offered as sacrifices. The tension was giving Minoru’s features an increasingly superhuman look.

However, this wasn’t Tatsuya’s impression. Because he was accustomed to the superhuman good looks, he didn’t really feel any particular pressure.

"No, this is enough for now."

All the suspicious hints on Minoru’s face disappeared after getting caught by surprise with Tatsuya’s response. He was ‘pushed’ to give out an innocent voice after this.

“Ss… Sorry about that.”

A somehow distorted laughter attack struck Minoru and he couldn't stop it. That was the kind of fellow he happened to be.

"You know what, Tatsuya-san, what can I say, you really are a profound person. I understand now why Grandfather has taken interest in you."

"No. I'm just an ordinary person."

Minoru's laughter continued, with the idea of directing an objection to Tatsuya who as a human being had a dazzling mind.

Right after being guided to their room, Miyuki and Minami decided to go to the Onsen, particularly the big communal bath. There wasn't any request from Miyuki for Tatsuya to accompany them. On the other hand, since Miyuki was just too inquisitive, there wasn't any specific need to hide the 'talk' about the 'Kanko'.

In the end, it seemed like a correct choice to make this decision. Also, the Onsen unexpectedly provided comfortable and pleasant feelings for the bath.

The communal bath was quite crowded in its own way. As usual in this day, no one was exposed naked in public. There was a partition to separate the booth to wash the body and the plunge bathtub with the hot water. This was a long-established rather quiet hotel, and despite a considerable number of adults being there, it can be said that the exposure for the people in the bath was controlled, -in fact, filtered. Still, Miyuki caught everyone's eye.

There wasn't any mixed bathing in this place, explicitly only bathing for people of the same sex. Additionally, this time the women present were mostly adult and some elderly too. Nevertheless, when Miyuki appeared beside the bathtub, everyone's eyes simultaneously turned onto her, bringing quietness into the room as if time stopped entirely.

Then, as soon as her white foot was quietly immersed in the hot water, a deep sigh leaked out of nowhere and afterwards time begun to advance again.

Next, Miyuki started to slowly submerge and the hot water gently quivered her bathrobe against her body. It wasn't just one or two that felt that a celestial maiden with the robe of an angel had just descended.

Miyuki felt very comfortable and exhaled a captivating sigh. But in it's place was the sound of taking a breath instead.

Suddenly, a rough wave hit the surface of the hot water. There were two women that looked around twenty years old who made a slight commotion and immediately got out of the bathroom. This didn't mean that the two women purposefully provoked one or two people to leave, but without noticing, Miyuki and Minami were left alone in the spring.

"What on earth happened to everyone?"

After Miyuki's words, Minami secretly exhaled a sigh next to her dazzling companion.

Minami understood very well the feelings of the women who left. Likewise regarding real feelings, Minami also didn't want to take a bath with Miyuki. It was only after she joined the bath that she inadvertently noticed. As if stimulating the inferiority complex of a woman, even her identity was so shaken that she wanted to run away from the scene.

This might no longer be relevant… but Minami had become accustomed to such superfluous concerns.

"Well, this is perfect. This way we can easily be more relaxed."

Minami regrettably agreed with this opinion. When Miyuki attracts attention, Minami who is beside her necessarily needs to fit into the picture. Minami is not used to being gazed at, unlike Miyuki. She is certainly a beautiful girl but she does not have the extremely good looks seizing all eyes of the same sex as well as the opposite one. Actually, the fact that it turned out to be just the two of them alone in the bath somewhat relieved Minami.

"Yes. This is really nice…"

Following that, Miyuki sighed.

Minami's body trembled with fear instead of surprise [43]

"Ara? What happened Minami-chan? Are you cold ?... Is it possible that the water has become cooler?"

Minami wasn't cold at all. On the contrary, she was burning.

[43] ビクッ(biku, SFX for tremble of surprise), ゾクッ(zoku, SFX for tremble of fear).

“I better immerse myself a bit more. I know it is not too good for my body, so only a little bit more until my body gets warmer”

It was a misunderstanding. Actually, Minami wanted to leave the hot water immediately. But she couldn’t oppose Miyuki's wishes just like that. So, understanding Miyuki’s hint and feeling the pressure, Minami immersed her body in the water.

Looking at Minami who was diligently immersing herself in hot water, Miyuki smiled satisfied. However, Minami’s consciousness was shaken with dizziness[44]. Regardless of the individual, everyone would get a hot flush when immersed in the hot bath for too long.

Tatsuya left the hotel, alongside Miyuki who looked absolutely refreshed and Minami who for some reason had an exhausted face. Actually, the fare they applied had dinner included, but it was late and they didn’t have enough time for it.

Later, in front of the station, Minoru saw with sorrowful eyes the parting of Tatsuya and the two girls, who were about to leave in a limousine.

“Today was really fun.”

As usual, what Minoru said was not put into courteous words.

“No. We’re the ones grateful for your help.”

Tatsuya replied on behalf of the three.

Minoru turned towards Tatsuya with eyes like a puppy this time. This was an expression that would make a woman of marriage age lose sanity.

“Can we meet again later?”

“I’d say that the mission isn’t over yet, we’ll meet again soon and at that time we’ll be under your care again.”

“It would be my pleasure! Please let me know of anything I can assist with. If it is something within my capability, I'll be glad to lend you a hand.

“Thank you. Then, we’ll be seeing you later."

“Okay! Until we meet again.”

[44] クラリ (kurari, SFX for dizzy)

Tatsuya and the girls parted from Minoru while exchanging a farewell with the promise of meeting again.

◊ ◊ ◊

As the three returned to Tokyo, they dined out before returning home. Tatsuya went to his room and logged onto his personal terminal instead of the home terminal. He immediately noticed a message on the answering machine. The sender of the message was Fujibayashi.

Even though he thought that there were lots of opportunities to contact her recently, he decided that this was a good time to call her on her private number.

“Ah, Tatsuya-kun? Welcome back.”

It was a strange feeling to be called “Welcome back”[45] on a call. Even today, when the addressee was on the other side of the video.

“I apologize for calling this late. Is Fujibayashi-san still at the Kudou residence?”

This question was quite relevant, since Fujibayashi was present when Tatsuya was meeting Kudou Retsu.

“Yeah, you’re quite perceptive.”

“Well, I’m just guessing.”

“Ara, Is that so? Since it's Tatsuya-kun, I thought you'd surely hack some local connection to obtain information.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have the ‘information gathering’ skill set that Fujibayashi-san has. Besides, a question about the message I just received . Specifically, what was ‘that’ of today.?”

‘That’. Even though Tatsuya didn’t express his awareness with any weird meaning, Fujibayashi laughed without emitting any sound.

[45]お帰りなさい (Okaerinasai, Welcome back) is used when someone returns to some physical place (usually home) and it’s the proper response to ただいま (Tadaima, I have come back).

Right. About 'that'...

She used the same word, before following up with the details.

“It’s about the ‘bunch’ that attacked Tatsuya’s group this evening.”

Fujibayashi easily expressed the word that Tatsuya made ambiguous.

Tatsuya didn't raise any complaint about what was mentioned. On the other hand, Fujibayashi didn't worry about any eavesdropping, as the safety of the connection was guaranteed.

“Do you know their identity?”

“Yes, though I think it was quite evident.”

“Magicians from the ancient faction of the Traditionalists”.

“Well, you already knew”.

Fujibayashi replied with an apathetic voice to Tatsuya’s correct answer.

“Still, I'm sure this is not the end, right?”

Tatsuya confidently asked Fujibayashi. However, if that's all there was to it, she wouldn't go so far as to ask Tatsuya to return her call.

“You’re right. No doubt the ‘bunch’ that attacked you guys was an execution unit from the Traditionalists and it also involved a monk that was exiled from the continent.”

With this comment, Fujibayashi made a somewhat disagreeable face.

“For the development of the Parasite Dolls, the Kudou involved the presence of this monk who was also being protected by them. I knew this monk rushed back to the Traditionalists hideout but it’s surprising to have found him in this place at this time.”

Isn't that to be expected?”

“Well, that's right…”

Following Tatsuya’s comment, Fujibayashi nodded with a sour face as if pained by a bug bite.

"They invited a magician with a high potential of becoming their enemy to the faction, instilled him with fear to do their covert operations, and now they let him escape... Additionally, he was an accomplice to an attack on civilians, minors on top of that[46]. I wonder what the hell did the Kudou Clan think for doing this."

"Even if we put aside the attack on the minors, attacking civilians is unheard of. Anyway, Minoru-kun was also attacked in the 9SC race, so at least I don't intend to put the blame solely on Kudou Clan."

"Well, you're right… It can't be helped now."

Fujibayashi somewhat shook her neck with her comment. Also, with the intent of changing the mood she hand-combed her slightly flustered hair.

"I wanted you to call me because I had to apologize for another matter."

"Apologize to me, you say?"

"Yes. The thing is that I should have called you before you did, but I didn't know when was the right time."

"I don't mind. You were saying something about an apology?"

Tatsuya did not feign ignorance, he really had no idea about it. In contrast, interestingly Fujibayashi was wearing a very uncomfortable face, as if she was expecting Tatsuya's remark.

"Actually, it's a matter concerning today's attack incident… This matter has become the jurisdiction of the unit in charge of information gathering."

Suddenly, Fujibayashi's tone changed to a more formal one that's expected of a military officer.

"Is that so? Then how would that concern me, Lieutenant?"

Making an effort to make a "poker face" expression, Fujibayashi prepared to answer Tatsuya's question.

"To sum it up, the 101 unit cannot intervene on this case. Needless to say, the Independent Magic Battalion cannot provide you any help".

Unfortunately, the 'poker face' didn't hold until the end.

[46] Remember Chapter 13 where the dolls attacked the Steeplechase race in the 9SC.

“Sorry about that, Tatsuya-kun”

Fujibayashi apologized to Tatsuya with a truly pitiable expression.

“We have only taken advantage of you when we needed you, but we cannot provide the help you need at critical times.”

However, Tatsuya didn’t quite understand she was so worried about.

“Lieutenant, I think you shouldn’t worry about this matter so much. Contrary to the concern of you taking advantage of me I think that you’ve lent me a hand in many ways.”

“Except that the situation is different from before. This time Tatsuya-kun himself has been completely marked.”

“It’s neither your fault Lieutenant, nor the fault of the Major. Even if that was the reason, I wouldn’t put any inconvenience to the unit.”

Anxiety creeped into Fujibayashi’s face. She could feel Tatsuya’s thoughts of his own personal safety not mattering to him.

“Hey…”

Her tone returned from ”Fujibayashi the Lieutenant” to “Fujibayashi the informal individual”.

“Couldn’t you ask Yakumo-sensei for his help?”

Tatsuya faced Fujibayashi’s questioning expression on the screen.

“I have already asked Master for his help. Specifically, I have asked for him to secretly watch my school friends’ surroundings.”

“I wasn’t referring to that.”

In addition to impatience, Fujibayashi seemed to start to feel a bit irritated.

“What about asking for your own personal protection? If not, even if you don’t want protection for your own, at least for Miyuki-san and Minami-chan.”

In fact, Fujibayashi was a little frustrated with Tatsuya who didn’t follow the real meaning of her concern.

“Lieutenant Fujibayashi might forget, but Miyuki is already well protected because Minami and I are her official guardians.”

Whatever Fujibayashi reflexively started expressing, Tatsuya was ready to scrutinize it over the screen.

“Moreover, I’m not going to involve Master in this affair for any other matter.”

"Why?"

Fujibayashi asked with some regained composure in her tone tone.

“The relationship of the Kudou, the Traditionalists, and Master is very deep. The more Master is involved, the bigger the possibility that Master’s Ninjitsu disciples could cause a mishap. With this, most probably the ones at the Hieizan temple will move. If that happens, a civil war will come to life. The Master Clans probably won’t have control over this.”

Tatsuya most likely did not consider all these possibilities. He designed them as an insurance to prevent any refuting counter-argument from Fujibayashi.

“If anything like this happens, it will needlessly give the chance to act to those who are sponsoring the runaway Zhou Gongjin.”

“...Did you say that there is a mastermind?”

“That would be very likely.”

After Tatsuya’s remark, Fujibayashi remained lost in thought on the other side of the screen.

“Well, whether the maneuver achieves that the top brass of Zhou Gongjin’s organization marches into the field for the final stage, or pushes them into a critical situation… Tatsuya-kun you really think this Zhou Gongjin is not the ‘Mastermind’?”

“The talk about if he’s the ‘Mastermind’ is easy. I should locate his whereabouts and then take care of him. The problem lies with the outcome of this because it’s like increasing the overall risk in an attempt to reduce the risk associated with his capture, -which I think from my point of view it’s a foolish plan…”

“…And of course, I think it’s of priority to think about the safety of oneself…”

“…Lieutenant Fujibayashi”

Fujibayashi lowered her eyes upon Tatsuya’s criticizing.

"Ok I understand. However, if you feel that things get really dangerous, contact me immediately without hesitation. This is because taking action to secure the life of a member in the military unit is allowed by the military discipline."

"Roger that."

Tatsuya responded with a hand salute. It has to be noted, that this wasn't done as sarcasm, but rather to make his declaration of intention as a member of a military unit and also to make Fujibayashi reassured of this intent.

Chapter 4

Tatsuya and the rest returned from Nara. And, the following evening. Neither the Shiba household, nor the Kudou clan, nor the Kuroba clan, nor First High, nor Kyuuchou temple made any move regarding the search for Zhou Gongjin.

A high class house close to the heart of the Tokyo downtown. The splendid abode was built to blend in with the regular houses, its' splendor was exactly the same as the other western style houses. The owner, Saegusa Kouichi, had called his current trusted retainer who served as his daughter's bodyguard, Nakura Saburo to his study.

"Do you remember the boy, Shiba Tatsuya?"

The master's query was fired off after the greeting.

"A young kouhai of Mayumi ojousama's from her high school years"

Nakura naturally replied blandly and inoffensively. Of course, Nakura recalled more than that as well but he did not say it.

Kouichi directed his eyes toward Nakura to make a glance. The reply did not match his opinion but, Kouichi did not voice a reproof.

"That kouhai of Mayumi's had contact with the Kuroba twins"

"The pair that covered themselves in glory at this year's Nine Schools competition, hmm. The male of the Kuroba clan's twins attracted attention while somehow avoiding the eyes of those connected with magic.

"Somehow, huh"

Kouichi's manner of speaking said 'I know something is being concealed', however, he did not put it into concrete words.

"Two weeks ago, those twins of the Kuroba clan visited Shiba Tatsuya's house. And yesterday and the day before yesterday, Shiba Tatsuya visited the Kudou clan. Apparently, he met with Sensei"

"He spoke directly to Kudou Retsu sama. That is no trifling thing"

Once again, Kouichi gave Nakura a glancing glare.

"Nakura, stop playing dumb"

This time, he did not stop with a look.

"Shiba passed a message from the Kuroba twins to Sensei. There is only one incident that could give the Yotsuba a reason that would specifically require the Kudou's cooperation"

Kouichi knew of the Kuroba's troops' failure to capture Zhou Gongjin in Yokohama's Chinatown.

Nakura was the one who had reported that to him.

Nakura was not going to point out that the one who contacted the Kudou clan was not the Kuroba twins but Shiba Tatsuya. Kouichi hadn't stated it overtly but Nakura knew his master had deduced the relationship between Shiba Tatsuya and the Yotsuba clan.

"Anyways, that man cannot flee the Yotsuba when they have secured the Kudou clan's aid"

Kouichi was referring to Zhou Gongjin when he said that man. The Kudou clan and the Youtsuba clan allying to search for Zhou was Kouichi over thinking things thought Nakura just now. He had gathered the data that the supposition was based on. However, Nakura did not mention that to Kouichi.

"I don't care if that man gets swatted by the Yotsuba. However, if he gets caught by the Yotsuba, there's a high probability that my clan would be placed in unfavorable circumstances"

Nakura bowed to convey his agreement to his master without words.

“The Yotsuba must not become aware of the relationship between the Saegusa and Zhou Gongjin”

Nakura and Kouichi had different opinions on that point. Nakura had confirmed that the Yotsuba were already aware of the Saegusa clan’s accommodation with Zhou Gongjin.

They probably hadn’t gotten hold of evidence. However, like Nakura and his ilk neither the Yotsuba nor the Kuroba under their umbrella needed evidence. The Yotsuba lived in the Under the same as people like Nakura. While the Under was a world that liked to play with fire, the way the natural order of things was viewed was different from the way a surface-dweller like Kouichi saw things. Nakura thought that but, due to the worlds they lived in being different, he thought there was no way for that to be understood with a mere verbal explanation. you acquired Zhou Gongjin’s location?”

“”Forgive me, please. Not even I know his whereabouts”

A wave of anger passed over Kouichi’s face.

His master on the verge of losing it, Nakura continued with statements to push him to the brink.

“However, we secured a line of communication. Calling him out is potentially possible”

Kouichi audibly ground his back teeth. He felt that he was being mocked by Nakura. However, he immediately threw out the emotion and restored his calm. Perhaps it was his natural disposition, his elegance was not a bit frayed.

“Then call out Zhou Gongjin. And take care of him decisively”

“As you wish”

He replied to the kill order with a nod, there was no hesitation. From the beginning, these kind of jobs were his specialty, before he was hired by the Saegusa, the majority of his employment came from being an assassin.

“If you want back up, pick whoever you wish to accompany you. You do not need to worry about the mansion’s security”

“No, just me will be enough”

Kouichi scowled slightly at the confident and conceited words, Nakura blandly delivered.

"Zhou Gongjin has the skill to breakthrough a Kuroba blockade. I believe that you're the one who reported that to me?"

Kouichi's point did not crack Nakura's facade.

"That was indeed so. Pardon my rudeness but I believe that the house security's skills are only good enough to die fruitlessly. Instead, they would be a hinderance"

Harsh words but, there was no trace of anger on Kouichi's face.

"Understood. Its alright for you to handle it for me the way you think best"

"Forgive my impertinence"

Nakura respectfully bowed his head to the casually given command.

"Ah. I'll transfer the duty of guarding Mayumi as usual"

"Thank you for your consideration"

Nakura replied with his head still bowed and withdrew from the study without meeting Kouichi's eyes.

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This last visit to Nara did not produce any actual results regarding the search for Zhou Gongjin but, he had secured through an interview the cooperation of the elder who still wielded influence over the world of Japanese magic despite his claims of retirement. They had captured the mainland's magicians who had vengefully ambushed them. He would have to wait on the information division but, he was not in such dire straits that he had to stealthily use the information division for clues from the prisoners they had been given.

Tatsuya spent a densely packed Saturday however, if he was able to leave school at noon then a different kind of business would be waiting. Today, he got help from Isori at last, inside the lecture hall, he displayed by the projector the results of casting

assistance carved seals, he had garnered from the experimental device they had manufactured.

".....in short, the problem is what is a good way to make the point about how much margin for error there is with carved seals, right?"

"Right. Just how much the form can be distorted and still be effective as a casting assistant? It is an essential part of this thesis"

"It would be alright to show me what experimental data you have gathered so far, right?"

"Yes, here"

Miyuki seemed proud and Honoka spellbound as they stared at Tatsuya and Isori's interacted that way.

"Honoka, Miyuki, I am going back to my patrol"

Having Shizuku's voice come at her from the side made Honoka start and return to herself.

"Ah, yes. Good luck"

"Shizuku, thank you for your work"

"Thanks. Honoka, Miyuki, later"

As Honoka watched Shizuku's back as she left, Miyuki said 'We should return as well" to her.

Miyuki carefully picked out a time that would not interrupt them to call out to Tatsuya and the pair returned to the Student Council room. Along the way, Miyuki questioned Honoka as if nothing had changed.

"Up to now, you haven't felt like anyone was following you or watching you?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Ojisama has been really worried about me, he even made arrangements with a security company for my sake"

"A security company of magicians?"

"Yes….actually, its Morisaki kun's family business"

Listening to those words made Miyuki's face change subtly, it could be said to be quite understandable. The Morisaki family ran a security company that was highly respected by both the ordinary and magician social sphere. Miyuki was aware of it as well but, her first impression didn't quite jell with it.

"We-well, Ojisama made the arrangements so, I think it will be alright"

"....right. Nothing would be wrong with the choice of Shizuku's Otousama"

A somewhat bored atmosphere wafted between the pair. It was erased out by Honoka's uneasy questioning.

"Miyuki…..how long must I stay at Shizuku's place"

The sheer unexpectedness of what she heard made Miyuki blink her eyes.

"Did Shizuku's family say something?"

"I didn't mean anything like that! It's because Ojisama, Obasama, and the people working for Shizuku's family have been entirely too nice to me!"

Her reflexive cry made Honoka make a "ah…." face.

"Forgive me, please. I didn't mean to imply that"

"N-no, Miyuki! Please forgive me. The way I spoke was mixed up!"

Any further protestations of "It's my fault" from Miyuki were left unsaid due to Honoka's angry look.

"Umm, I didn't mean that, I meant just how long do I have to have a bodyguard and be on my guard……."

Honoka's uneasiness was natural. Since she wasn't a descendant of magicians produced from a lab, she hadn't been raised to serve in battle.

Miyuki felt that her standards were not mistaken.

"Even though it might be long, I think until the Thesis Competition is over"

It looked like Honoka had not expected a clear answer. She gazed back at Miyuki's face with a "huh?" look.

"It's fine. Nothing scary will happen"

Miyuki kept a gentle smile like the kind used to reassure small children within Honoka's line of sight as she answered. Honoka turned red and looked down in shame.

Until last Saturday, they hadn't been aware of it but Mizuki and Mikihiko's houses were unexpectedly close.

Mizuki's house was one station from the city center of Atsugi city.

Mikihiko's home was in Isehara city at the foot of Mount Tanzawa.

Distance-wise they weren't that close but regarding commuting on the cabinet line from Atsugi to Isehara, it was around 5 minutes from the closest station to Mizuki's home to the closest station to Mikihiko's home.

"Um, Yoshida kun. Just this far is fine, really"

"No, that would be pointless"

They had left just before the school gates closed due to preparing for the Thesis Competition. Because the topic, Isori had chosen for this time, needed more computer graphics type stuff created than devices constructed; the Art club, Mizuki belonged to, was going all out. Her own specialty was old-fashioned watercolor painting but she was also fairly skilled at CG which was an indispensable ability in this project.

For that reason, she wasn't able to leave school until the last possible moment. Well, thanks to that, seeing Mizuki home did not interfere with his duties as the Public Morals committee chief.

It was already October and nearly the Tenth. Since long ago, the passing of Autumn Equinox meant that days of autumn were running out. The sky was rapidly starting on the twinkling stars. No matter how much pedestrian traffic there was downtown or how many commuters going directly from the station to their homes; there was no way leaving a girl at the station with a "See you, later" counted as seeing her home. Just as, Mikihiko stated.

Mizuki, herself, was not displeased with Mikihiko seeing her home. However, she was unsure about what to talk about as a couple alone among commuters. It was not like the pair had a wealth of possible topics, they had already exhausted a variety of topics in the cabinet on Saturday and established that they were finished with those on Monday.

Just two people alone in a narrow car without talking. With Miyuki's slight shyness, the cabinet was quite trying or rather an ordeal.

The interval in front of the station while waiting in line for a cabinet was without talking but, since they were not in a private enclosed space, the silence hadn't been burdensome.

"Come to think of it, isn't your specialty watercolors, Shibata san?"

"Uh, yes"

Despite the fact that Mikihiko hadn't waited until, they had gotten into the cabinet to offer up the topic of conversation, he had taken the trouble to think up; it did not prompt any thought of "what an insensitive boy" in Mizuki.

"Really. I like the subtle colouring of watercolors…...I can add color to CG more freely now but, I'm still one of those who wish to paint by brush"

It was Mizuki's nature to answer the questions, she was asked, to the fullest.

"Yet, you're good at CG despite that, incredible"

"It's nothing, I still have a long ways to go on watercolors"

The humble and shy Mizuki's face turned extremely red and whined 'don't flatter me' without words. Unfortunately, Mikihiko had never garnered EXP in that kind of sensing.

"But, your club president boasts of you. He says your talents for graphics is incredible, Shibata san. Come to think of it, aren't you getting good grades in Magic Geometry, Shibata san?"

"Ye-yes. I have been receiving the points I earned in each round of tests"

Mizuki smiled jokingly.

"haha, same as me. Thanks to Magic History and Magic Linguistics, I am maintaining my high rank. However, no matter what I do I have trouble with Magical Engineering"

"Your specialty is charms, Yoshida kun…….eh, come to think of it Yoshida kun, you didn't chose Magic Geometry. Why?"

"Because Magic Pharmacology is more useful for my techniques. The truth is I actually want to study Magic Geometry as well"

“So that’s why you go to Tsudzura sensei’s office occasionally”

“No, that’s sort of because sensei has been calling me over…..”

Even though they were under the impression that there were in no danger, the possibility of it lay between the pair as they talked.

However, no matter how much he was enjoying his conversation with Mizuki, Mikihiko did not shirk his monitoring their surroundings.

Even now, Mikihiko was dealing with the shikigami searching the area. In order to keep Mizuki unaware, he did not cut off the conversation as he used the shikigami and at the same time, he triggered an investigative spell.

The area of the spell did not expand spatially; it expanded in significance. All the gazes upon Mizuki that emitted significant magical waves were reflected in Mikihiko’s mind. It did not matter if it was filled with ill or good will, though the lustful ones were more numerous than the benign ones. She did not stand out next to Miyuki and Erika but Mizuki was also a girl that was significantly cuter than average. Besides, since she became a second year, her body had matured into one that had the power to draw the eye.

The density of that kind of static made it tough but the applied filter picked out the ones suffused with magical waves and sent it into Mikihiko’s mind, irritating him in many ways. While under that strain, Mikihiko located his target without either Mizuki or the magicians gunning for her being aware of it.

Fujibayashi had once stated that Mikihiko had ‘the glow of a prodigy’. Before he got to know Tatsuya, he had spent a year feeling like a failure. Since he got to know Tatsuya, he had been embroiled in harrowing events and his image of himself had been reexamined and changed inside that year. The degree of growth that had taken in him in the two year period was the equivalent to ten to twenty years for a normal practitioner.

It is the point in the talk to come to this pair. Before their eyes, the door to the commuter car, they were waiting for, opened. Mikihiko let Mizuki get on first, he examined the surrounding area, did the Juhou chant of ‘Return’---an ancient magic to return a shikigami to the one who dispatched it.

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There is an underlayer to this scene. In an abstract sense to be sure, this was not a metaphoric underlayer, this was something taking place around the back entrance to a building rather than the front entryway.

Describing a building's entrance as an 'entryway' does seem strange at first but, anyway it was on the opposite side of the buildings to the storefronts meant to attract customers, even in this age, there were back alleyways created by buildings. Trash was automatically disposed of by a dedicated underground tube, cleaning machines bought by the local district to clean the walkways meant there was no trash so there was no bad smells. However, it was inevitable that the city lights did not reach there.

"Darn it, that brat!"

Lurking in the deep darkness of that pathway, a man in his forties was using a hand to stem off the abusive language.

His right hand was covering the fingers of his left hand that were dripping blood.

"He sent my shiki back to me. Isn't the Yoshida's second son supposed to have lost his mystic power!"

Was speaking to himself a habit, he certainly did not act like someone pretending he wasn't alone.

"Nevertheless that was a violent way to do it…...I was only watching"

Was the blood flowing longer than he expected,the man temporarily released his left hand and took a card of paper that could not serve as a handkerchief---he had taken out a charm.

"Just for that , I'll use my own blood as an offering"

As he spoke, the man pressed a charm to his wound and chanted a curse. Since he bound it with the last activation line of "Kyuu kyuu nyoritsu ryou", perhaps he was an onmyouji or perhaps some kind of chinese occultist.

"I'm going to make you remember me, you darn Yoshida brat. My blood isn't cheap"

"Futile, futile. With your skill, old man, all you would get was your curse returned to you again"

With a terrified look, the man turned toward the voice. He was not an amateur. He had put up a kekkai to keep anyone being aware of him so he could concentrate on his work. He had not forgotten to put up a 'circle' to warn him if anyone approached. Nonetheless, he had been taken completely by surprise.

Without words, the man took out a new charm. There was no way this was an amateur who happened to breach the kekkai by chance. Considering the remarks that had just been made, this was unmistakably an enemy.

However, the man's spell was not released.

"You're not watching your back"

The attention of the man who had turned around had been harvested by the young man who had just approached him from behind. He had gotten hit with an attack that caused him to lose consciousness. As a matter of fact, this was a dangerous act with potential after-effects that could not be ignored. However, they did not show any sign of hesitation.

"These guys are too crappy to be good training. Are guards really necessary?"

"Hey, don't say that. Enduring inactivity is also part of training"

The two young men looking at eachother resembled each other facially and physically. This was not a resemblance since birth, they had eaten rice from the same pot, they had overcome the same hell, a type of constructed resemblance.

And more than anything, their heads were shaved smooth the same way.

◊ ◊ ◊

The following day during the break between the first and second periods. Tatsuya visited Public Morals headquarters as requested by Mikihiko.

"Ah, Tatsuya. Sorry about calling you here"

Tatsuya saw Mikihiko, who had arrived first, operating his handheld console, when he entered the room.

He locked the door and displayed the 'In conference' sign.

"No problem. So why the hurry"

"There's no time, so I'll be brief. Yesterday on the way home, Shibata was targeted"

Tatsuya showed a surprised face at the information given by the harshly scowling Mikihiko.

"Mizuki? But, she didn't act like that had happened"

"Shibata is unaware. She was only watched by shikigami, distance viewing and the like and I broke all their spells"

"Oh, I see"

The eyes of Mikihiko had an edge of hostility as he stared at Tatsuya as he heard the relief in Tatsuya's voice.

"It is as you expected, Tatsuya"

"Ah. Thanks for escorting her for me"

"But, isn't it strange"

Tatsuya pretended that he didn't understand what Mikihiko was saying and listened to his scolding.

"Why the heck did Shibata san have to be targeted by those thugs? They weren't simple punks. I wouldn't call them top notch but, it felt like they weren't amateur criminals"

"Professional criminals?"

"They were 'Under' magicians"

For an instant, Mikihiko faltered as if it was hard to put into words but he did not stay silent.

"Why are guys like that targeting Shibata san? If their goal was the Thesis Competition then they should be targeting Isori senpai or Nakajou senpai or Minakami senpai. Tatsuya aren't you hiding something from us? That activation sequence for a modified Shikigami that you showed me before wasn't something you accidentally found. The guys who attacked you are connected to the ones that are keeping tabs on Shibata san, right!?"

There was no reply from Tatsuya.

Mikihiko was the first to look away.

“Tatsuya...you can reject me by saying something like ‘it’s unnecessary’ but, I owe you. It is thanks to you that my confidence and ability as a magician was restored”

Tatsuya tried to interrupt to refute that but, Mikihiko continued to speak.

“So, I wouldn’t be deadweight. I’ll do anything if I can be of help to you and if you want to keep it secret, I won’t tell anyone”

He turned his face back to Tatsuya with desperation. The light that could be seen in Mikihiko’s eyes was similar to that of a cornered animal.

“However, if I don’t know what’s happening, I won’t be able to protect Shibata san!”

Just now, Mikihiko had confessed to Tatsuya that he had special feelings for Mizuki but, he, himself, was probably unaware of it. Tatsuya did not attempt to use that to avoid the conversation.

“I cannot go into detail”

“Tatsuya!”

Mikihiko naturally raised his voice and pressed closer to Tatsuya.

“A foreign magician who served as a guide for enemy operatives in last year’s Yokohama Incident is being sheltered by the ‘Traditionalists’. I am pursuing him”

However, when the next words out of Tatsuya’s mouth informed him of a portion of the truth, Mikihiko lost both his voice and the color in his face.

“I’m sorry. That’s all I’m able to say”

“I see…..you”

Mikihiko stopped speaking before he said JDSF and shut his mouth, taken aback. Even, within a soundproofing field that was not something to be spoken aloud.

“Now, I am the one who is sorry…..and, thank you for telling me”

Mikihiko completely misunderstood. Just as Tatsuya had induced him to.

And, Tatsuya felt no guilt over this. The actual truth of this situation, his relationship with the Yotsuba, was something that should not be known yet. It was still too

dangerous for it to be known. It was way too soon to drag Mikihiko in as an accomplice.

"Tatsuya, you said the Traditionalists"

"Yes. I know the target is being sheltered by them"

".....the I think I can be useful. After school…. no that wouldn't work. Can you talk tonight? After I see Shibata san home, I'll come back to school again"

"Got it"

A time limit hadn't been set by Maya of course and from Tatsuya's perspective there was not a reason to rush. It was not like he had a personal grudge with Zhou Gongjin. The unvarnished truth was that leaving it alone wouldn't make him anxious at all.

However, thought Tatsuya, would Mikihiko really be satisfied with that.

7:30 pm in the evening. As to be expected, by this hour, the work for the thesis competition was finishing up for the day. Only the male students remained but, this wasn't a problem for either Public Safety or Public Morals.

As usual the former student council officer was there so closing the gate afterwards could be left to the thesis team leader, Isori. However, from the start, the student council president had designated him as her representative to supervise. So no one regarded Tatsuya's presence after school as suspicious.

Due to not have any free time, his problems---like his normal schoolwork---were piling up pretty high. Tatsuya called up his own curriculum on the student council terminal and dealt with all his towering pile of homework in one swoop.

Immediately after he finished off his physics paper, the chime rang indicating that there was a visitor to the student council room.

"Pixie, please"

"Yes. Master"

Tatsuya commanded Pixie who had been turned into the student council's maid to deal with it. She confirmed the visitor's bio-data and immediately opened the door. Mikihiko came in and she left by the same door, Tatsuya had already given her orders.

“I’ve kept you waiting, Tatsuya”

While sitting down on the seat Pixie had offered, Mikihiko made the first easy greeting.

“No, it was a good time for me to take a breather”

Mikihiko cast a doubtful eye on Tatsuya who answered thus. Tatsuya had left the terminal as it was. Mikihiko could see the lists of reports on the monitor from where he was sitting.

However, the extra tsukkomi broke the tension.

“It’s a bit abrupt but, let’s continue from this morning”

Mikihiko considered keeping his thoughts fresh more important than the mood and plunged into the main topic.

“I want to confirm one thing. Tatsuya are you certain that the target is being sheltered by the Traditionalists?”

“It was a trustworthy information source”

“I see…..”

Mikihiko spent a brief period of time, only a few seconds, sunken in thought.

“First, let’s make my position clear. Those who claim the name of Traditionalists are a large group made up of both good and bad ancient magicians. It would be fine to say that the Ancient Magicians are divided into the Traditionalists, those who support them and those who oppose them”

“Really? Master said that they were despised by magicians who succeeded genuine traditions”

He had not actually got that information from Yakumo however, Tatsuya felt that putting it that way would allay suspicions.

“Certainly. However in contrast, many practitioners who feel constrained by hierarchy and discipline and lack status sympathize with the Traditionalists who are not associated with a Tradition”

“What about the Yoshida clan?”

A little while ago, Mikihiko had said “Make my position clear”. In short, he probably meant to make either his own or his clan’s position for or against the traditionalists ‘clear’.

“The Yoshida clan has been called a religious order type of clan from old. Due to the fact that we seek spells that enshrine gods and spells that lead us to god”

That was a trait of magicians who allied with the Traditionalists.

“So of course, the Yoshida clan is antagonistic to the Traditionalists”

However, Mikihiko’s reply indicated the reverse.

“The Traditionalists who partnered with the former Lab 9 and we, the Yoshida clan are fundamentally different in how we think about magic. The Yoshida clan’s goal has always been spells that bring us closer to god. So there’s no way we would ally ourselves with guys who want to get stronger by any means necessary”

Was Mikihiko’s statement his own opinion or was it a set of values given to him by his parents; with only what he stated here, he couldn’t tell. However, it was clear that he took pride in the idea even if he was only borrowing the concept.

“Therefore, this time aside from whatever considerations there are, it is alright to rely on me for this. If you wish it, Tatsuya I think you can get the cooperation of the whole Yoshida clan”

“No, that would be a bit….if I could call on the Yoshida clan for cooperation then it wouldn’t be something that can’t be talked about”

“That’s right”

Tatsuya and Mikihiko meant different things by ‘can’t be talked about’ but, Tatsuya was the only one who knew that.

“Understood then the next thing is to plan. Since Tatsuya can’t give detailed information, I have to think of a ways that don’t need it”

As Mikihiko said that he made a malicious grin that could not be said to be ill suited to his face.

“I don’t know whether to call it good or bad luck, this year’s Thesis Competition takes place in Kyoto, the Traditionalists’ main headquarters”

What Mikihiko had enthusiastically told him did not match the information he had gotten from Fujibayashi and Minoru in Nara but Tatsuya did not have enough source material to determine who was correct.

"That seems so"

However, regardless of whichever one was correct, Tatsuya listened to Mikihiko.

"From the start, I expected to dispatch a security team to check the conditions of the site but, I think I'll add myself to it"

"Therefore?"

"You can join the security team in charge of that for me right, Tatsuya?"

Mikihiko answered Tatsuya's question with a question.

Tatsuya was not urged to reply to Mikihiko's question.

"I can"

"Then, it would be okay for you to move freely within the city and its environs. Under the pretext of ensuring nothing like what happened last year occurs, the site area to search can be seen as very wide"

"I'm grateful for that. Then, what about you, Mikihiko?"

"I'll be the decoy. I'll hit the New International Conference Center serving as the site with a gaudy investigative spell, I will try with all my might to cause a backlash to the Traditionalists' senses"

"Got it"

Tatsuya smirked understanding Mikihiko's intentions.

"If the Traditionalists come after me then I can legally claim self-defense. If that happens it won't be Tatsuya's business since they're picking a fight with the Yoshida family"

"The difference in combat power won't be a problem?"

"If it's a one to one confrontation then, I absolutely won't lose in terms of ability. If the Traditionalists try to overwhelm the Yoshida clan by numbers alone then the other traditional occult groups won't take it lying down. The important thing is the other side picks the fight. Because members of the ancient style traditions place

importance on titles. If I picked the fight then they would probably mill around like gawkers but, if they pick the fight make no mistake they would intercede"

Tatsuya swiftly ran the simulations for those situations in his head. He feared that fellow members of the ancient occult traditions would have a grandiose clash with magic and turn the city and its environs into a battlefield. The police and the military would have their hands full suppressing it and Zhou Gongjin would seize his chance to flee.

However, if it appeared as if the Traditionalists picked the fight first and the Ancient occult tradition magicians interceded that would give him an excuse to investigate the inner workings of the Traditionalists. For Tatsuya that would mean he could anticipate extremely desirable developments.

"If the other side doesn't start something?"

"Then my ritual will find Tatsuya's target. Your opponent is an occult magician from the continent, right? So his psion waves would be different. Thanks to Tatsuya working me to the bone, My awareness of psion waves is at last a skill I'm extremely proficient at. I'm confident that among Ancient occult practitioners I have no superiors"

"Big talk"

As Tatsuya smiled, Mikihiko did not deny that he was bragging. He could discern the differences between the techniques of ancient magicians. He did not recognize similar habits in the psion waves of modern magicians. Because it would be meaningless, even if he observed psion waves that had not yet become spells. Too many different practical methods had been born from Modern magic's framework to research. For example, even the Stars had almost no magicians who were modern magic magicians that could implement a way to detect the psion waves of parasites as accurately as he himself could.

Mikihiko had a firm foundation to base his confidence on.

"What are you going to do about Mizuki?"

The Mikihiko's face that had been overflowing with confidence was suddenly clouded. Tatsuya found that easily understood change strange but even he had enough discretion not to laugh at this kind of moment.

".....it is too dangerous for Shibata san to go with me"

"Then I'll arrange for Mizuki's protection"

"Can you take care of it?"

"Of course. After all, this was originally my problem"

Mikihiko sighed, relieved.; he probably thought Tatsuya would make arrangements with the JSDF.

The truth was he had already had Yakumo's students protecting Mizuki but, he intended to have another team dispatched from a different source than Mikihiko expected just in case.

"When shall we do it?"

"I'll lay the groundwork on the school's side of things as the public morals chief…..Friday?"

"Understood. I'll tell Miyuki to make the preparations in secret on the student council's side of things"

".....but, you're a member of the student council as well, Tatsuya? Do it yourself"

Tatsuya didn't reply to that , just made a malicious smirk.

Mikihiko also made a pained smile and stood up.

◊ ◊ ◊

Common Era 2096, October 11th, Sunday evening, a certain place within the city limits of Kyoto.

The sky was heavy with clouds and even now rain threatened to pour out of the black night sky.

Even this park that was a place for people to rest during the day, now that it was the middle of night showed little sign of the presence of people. And on this particular evening, there were only two human silhouettes.

"Nakura sama. Have I made you wait?"

Zhou Gongjin called out to Nakura who was standing by the riverside as he walked from upstream.

"No, you are right on time, Zhou san"

Nakura looked up and replied with a suitably friendly greeting.

Although they both extended their hands, they were still careful to keep exactly the right distance as they faced each other.

"It's been about two months"

Zhou started the conversation,

"Yes, I haven't contacted you for a while. Even if I tried to visit, I do not know where your new residence is, you will just have to forgive me"

Nakura countered Zhou's Jab with matching bluntness.

"Last month, I was surprised by a matter suddenly coming up that left me no choice but to move. If you knew about it beforehand, you could have informed me"

"No, I cannot express how impossible it would have been. Considering who your opponent was, it is inevitable that we couldn't have gotten a clue beforehand"

Zhou had turned tail and ran away from Kuroba at Nakura's directive and Zhou was being sarcastic when he spoke about it being too tough for the Saegusa clan to get inside information from the Yotsuba. Zhou made a graceful smile at the honest look that Nakura met his ill tempered outburst with. ---This was their normal way of interaction.

"So then, Nakura sama, what could be your business today"

Zhou's smile was so unshaken as if his face didn't know how to make any other expression but a smile as he questioned Nakura. There was no trace of impatience. The situation was not suitable for a long conversation.

"Zhou san, are you aware of Kudou joining forces with Yotsuba"

Zhou's eyebrows twitched in surprise. Still, his smile did not collapse. "No….could it be because of me?"

"I believe the situation is thus, Zhou san, the Yotsuba clan knows that the Traditionalists are sheltering you, so they requested the aid of the Kudou clan who have an adversarial relationship with the Traditionalists"

“Hahahahaha…..”

Zhou suddenly burst out laughing.

“I’ve become quite prominent. Not just the Yotsuba who are at the pinnacle of the strongest in the modern world even the former holders of the title ‘the strongest’, the Kudou are aiming for me”

Zhou Gongjin laugh seemed so happy.

He did not get desperate; this was not the madness of someone driven into a corner.

From the start, tranquility disturbed him---his laugh gave off that impression.

“The Kudou clan with their long hostile relationship with the Traditionalists have probably investigated them thoroughly. I believe without a doubt it will take long to pinpoint your hiding place”

Nakura was unmoved by Zhou’s weirdness and indifferently continued his analysis.

Zhou quelled his laughter and answered in a cynical voice.

“Right, certainly. The gentlefolks of the Traditionalists have taken care of me for nearly two months, however, just about now would be a suitable time to take my leave. So do you Nakura sama or rather the Saegusa clan say that they can furnish me with a new hiding place?”

“Yes”

That didn’t seem to be the answer he was expecting. Zhou cast a doubtful eye upon the agreeing Nakura.

“Let us speak frankly. The Saegusa cannot permit you to fall into Yotsuba hands, Zhou san. Because the link between you, Zhou san, and the Saegusa clan absolutely must not be revealed”

“So you prepared an escape route for me to beforehand?”

“Yes”

Zhou used the words, “escape route” rather than “hiding place” when he asked Nakura for confirmation.

“I will escort you to a place the hands of the Yotsuba can’t reach”

“Really….could the name of that place be”

Zhou casually reached into his pocket.

Nakura had already, unobtrusively gripped a cell phone shaped CAD.

“something like the pyre!”

“No, the name of the place is Hell!”

The pair simultaneously kicked off of the ground to gain distance. Zhou took a glowing black talisman from his pocket---what he produce was an inscribed card and Nakura let loose an activation sequence from his CAD.

Zhou probably had the spell on standby from the beginning. Their magics activated at the same time.

An entirely black, four-legged beast came from Zhou’s card, likely a synthetic body that imitated a dog had leapt out. The black dog instantly sprang off the ground to make a pounce straight at Nakura’s windpipe.

Ten-odd transparent needles pierced the shadowy body from below

Nakura’s leg was submerged in the river. The needles that pierced the shadow beast were fired off from the vicinity of that leg.

“Water needles, huh……”

Zhou’s eyes were able to perceive the nature of the transparent needles within the darkness.

“That was careless. It was a mistake to set the meeting at the riverbank. The “higher ground” advantage seems to be yours”

“That is magic that constructs a synthetic beast using shadows as a medium”

“Yes. The boring name is embarrassing but, my master calls it, ‘Shadowbeast’. The spell is a hybrid magic that incorporates western sorcery making it too disgraceful to brag about”

“Western sorcery…...a hell hound, eh. So, I erred on ‘time’,huh. I should of at least made it a night when the moon was out”

The pair was not just carelessly exchanging discourse on techniques. As they were talking, the shadowbeast was spat out of the card in Zhou had in his hand and Nakura intercepted it with the water needles.

Zhou did not appear to be composing new magic. In short, the inscribed card Zhou held probably had many more beasts stockpiled within. Despite the fact that the number was already over ten, there was no sign of the supply being exhausted. Just how many layers of magic had been piled on to that tiny card, it's capacity seemed to have no bounds.

"However, I don't understand"

"What"

None the less, the first to voice a question was Zhou.

Nakura's expression did not change; he was attacking the phantom beast, Zhou had summoned mechanically. The reply, he made to Zhou, was almost completely devoid of emotion.

"The development focus of Lab 7 was colony control magic. At the very least, colony control magic should be able to move over 100 objects simultaneously. The number of objects being manipulated shouldn't be this low. Could it possibly be that you are taking it easy on me"

"Ridiculous. You are not an opponent I can take lightly, Zhou san"

Nakura answered with a regretful voice. Zhou's attention was more drawn to the emotion packed into the voice than the statement.

"Zhou san, do you know of the words, extra numbers"

Water needles flew toward Zhou. Although they could not possibly discerned in the darkness by the human eye, Zhou easily dodged them with a sidestep.

This was not a speed within the range of human physical prowess. It was probably an ancient magic of the continent that had the same effects as personal acceleration magic.

"I know of it. Magicians descended from magicians that were granted a number by the magician development labs that created the Ten Master Clans but were later stripped of their number"

Water needles flew one by one. Despite keeping Zhou busy dodging, the timing with which the shadowbeasts were summoned was unabated. The positions of offense and defense were instantly reversed.

“So, what are the reasons for stripping numbers?”

“Search me, I am not that well informed. But, the only reason I’m aware of is the desired abilities wasn’t developed”

The needles became a downpour. Zhou pulled out a handkerchief from his chest pocket.

The white handkerchief expanded to a size that covered his entire body, it defended him from the water needle shower.

Nakura ceased his attack.

Zhou peeked his face out from underneath the cloth.

“I am without a doubt, a magician who is unable of developing the ability that Lab 7 hoped for”

“Really, sorry about that”

Zhou fired off a single shadow beast.

Nakura operated his CAD and barely managed to shoot it down.

Zhou lowered the hand holding the inscribed card.

Nakura kept his fingers on his CAD, as the discussion about Extra Numbers resumed.

“The basic model of colony control magic is to prepare the projectile beforehand with a spell to manipulate it”

Nakura unfolded an activation sequence.

Zhou prepared the white cloth.

“However, I didn’t think that was combat effective. Battle doesn’t only occur at times when you conveniently have a bulky medium on hand. Despite the fact the development of an assistance tool known as a CAD that you could wear all the time, for some reason you had to carry all that extra stuff”

“Your words would make the ears of the type of ancient occultists who couldn’t use magic without having curse tools to use as a convenient medium burn. However, I believe CADS are not the only ‘things you can wear all the time’? There are also types that look like large guns”

“Gun-shaped CADs are specialized model. I don’t think those are combat effective either”

Nakura and Zhou remained on the brink of invoking magic, they both were looking for a gap in the other’s defenses. Perhaps, even the very words, they were exchanging, might be a tactic to create an opportunity.

“Anyway I could not comprehend the Laboratory's plan. Therefore, I arranged sequences that could use colony control magic at any time. At that same time, the number of targets I can control is less than 100 but, in exchange, I worked out a technique to make liquids form projectiles”

“How unfortunate”

“As a result, the number was stripped”

At this point, the order in which they made statements was reversed.

Zhou Gongjin laid the trap.

A fragment of Nakura’s mind was distracted.

Zhou threw the inscribed card at Nakura.

While he was caught off guard, Nakura pelted water needles at Zhou. It was not a barrage, he created an orbiting circle.

A shadowbeast jumped out of the inscribed card midair.

Nakura composed new magic to ambush it.

The white cloth fell with a thud. Zhou was no longer over there.

The shadowbeast, pierced by the water needles, dissolved into the night’s shadows.

The pack of water needles that were making an arc fruitlessly penetrated the air.

The inscribed card that fell onto the surface of the river spat out a black shadow.

Nakura, who caught that at the corner of his eye, invoked a leaping spell.

Nakura avoided the spray of water that spat from the jaw by a hair's breadth.

Nakura, who landed on the other bank, prepared his next attack as he corrected his stance. As Nakura eyed the darkness of the river between the banks, his abdomen was pierced from behind by a black horn.

The horn, piercing Nakura's abdomen, broke down to a thick gooey tar like substance that was blown away by the night wind that passed over the surface of the river. Robbed of the support, Nakura collapsed face up.

He could hear the sound of footsteps treading on river pebbles from the direction of his head. With difficulty, he looked in that direction; the first thing he saw was Zhou covered by a white cloth. Zhou was walking from the other side. He wasn't unwounded either. The fabric at the left shoulder and right flank of his expensive three piece suit had open holes from which blood sullied it.

"It appears that you were not deceived by the shadowbeast"

Nakura understood what had happened without an explanation. He had leaped to the opposite bank intending to get away from Zhou but, Zhou had actually been on this side, he had turned his back on his enemy when he landed.

"Yes, I, myself, took the part of your plaything"

"Directional…….misdirection...is...this...the...ancient... art of….Kimon...Tonkou?"

It was difficult to understand Nakura's broken speech but, Zhou's ability to understand was unimpeded.

"Yes. Nevertheless, it has been a long time since my blood has flowed this much. I can say without lying that the skills of Nakura Saburo outstrip those of Kuroba Mitsugu"

"Ha..ha..ha..I...am...honored"

Zhou knelt down on one knee next to Nakura and spoke in a gentle voice.

"We have been close enough to share sake together. Don't you have any last wishes?"

"A...wish...yes...I...have….just……..one"

"What could it be?"

"That….you……"

"Yes"

"Please die with me!"

Nakura mustered the last of his strength as he shouted.

That spell---could be called the words of a curse.

Nakura's body burst open from the chest and needles made from his blood attacke Zhou Gongjin.

Zhou stood up.

He scowled looking at the red needles that pierced the arms that had protected his face.

"There are many wishes, I would be willing to grant since it was your last one, however"

He groped for the needles that had slipped through the gaps that both arms had left to reach his ears to get them out.

The needles melted back into blood and tiny scars remained on his earlobes. Zhou blew out a sigh and took out a new inscribed card from his jacket pocket.

When the blood needles met the time limit for phenonomen modification, they melted all at once.

He chanted a short spell.

The piercing wounds on Zhou Gongjin's skin disappeared like a time lapsed photo images (=high-speed regeneration).

"Unfortunately, this level of magic cannot kill me"

Zhou got up and sighed as he looked at his own skin. He had probably expected Nakura to have some kind of self destructive attack prepared. He had got his arms up in time to protect his face because he was watching for a water needle attack.

"Can't stay here any longer. Even if it is the middle of the night, I can't help standing out looking like this"

However, that was because he hadn't foreseen that Nakura would use his own blood to attack him. He looked down at his clothes that were smeared with his victim's blood and let out a sigh.

Zhou took out the handkerchief, he had returned to his pocket unnoticed.

No, he hadn't returned it. This was clearly a different one from before.

It was not white, it was a black handkerchief.

He expanded the darkness colored handkerchief, he covered his body with a large wide shadow.

The handkerchief that turned into a black cloth changed into a shadow, leaving nothing but Nakura's body behind.

Chapter 5

October 12th, Friday. With half a month remaining until the Thesis Competition on October 28th, the hustle and bustle within the school abruptly increased. The Kyoto Thesis Competition was said to be dedicated to pure theory, expectations were that the operational details wouldn't be as extensive as last year's, but in the end, it turned into a tremendous commotion.

As the presenter, Isori personally took command and entered the fray to manage the preparations. Hattori was in command of the security team and was zealous in training them. Honoka and Izumi were working together to get a handle on the arrangements to travel to Kyoto.

Of course, neither Tatsuya nor Miyuki were playing around. As Student Council President, Miyuki was responsible for keeping an eye on the progress of the entire operation and dispatching help to portions where it was bogging down. The help in most cases was Tatsuya. He participated in presentation preparations, he took part in the training of the security team and when Miyuki, Honoka and Izumi couldn't be in multiple places, he took care of the Student Council business and he also flitted about as Miyuki's aide.

When Mikihiko finally came to the Student Council room, Tatsuya had tied up his exhausting work long enough to take a break, just around the time the school gate was closing after school.

"Pardon me…."

It seemed like Mikihiko was not yet used to using the connecting staircase between the student Council room and Public Morals headquarters. There was a distinct difference between him and the carefree Shizuku who came in with him

(additionally, Shizuku was in the midst of guarding Azusa). “You’re right on time, Mikihiko”

Although Tatsuya called out to him in a lighthearted tone, Mikihiko nervousness wasn’t that easily dispelled.

“Well then…...Since I was able to see how busy you were, there was no way I was going to be later than I promised”

Hearing that statement, Miyuki let out a laugh that somehow exuded recognition.

“It would be a relief if everyone was as earnest as Yoshida kun”

Feeling that this was the calm before the storm, Tatsuya urged Mikihiko to get down to business.

“Mikihiko, shall we begin the briefing right away”

“Yes, let’s”

Perhaps, Mikihiko got the same impression, he spread out the huge roll of electronic paper, he had in his hand onto the conference table.

A map of the city of Kyoto emerged on the electronic paper that almost completely covered the table.

“Today’s briefing is regarding the preliminary report on the security of the actual location”

In a formal tone, Mikihiko begun his explanation.

“Regarding security on the actual day, the former head of club activities, Hattori has been assigned to proceed with the arrangements. Hattori senpai is also personally overseeing the briefing of the other schools and I think it’s fine to leave it to him, right”

“Is it alright not to have invited Hattori senpai to this meeting?”

The one who nodded in answer to Honoka’s question as if to say it was fine was not Mikihiko but Tatsuya.

“An agreement was reached with former chairman Hattori, that it would be fine if he was merely notified of the results of the briefing. Right, Chief Yoshida”

“It is as Secretarial Chief Shiba says”

Mikihiko seemed to have trouble saying the title, 'Secretarial Chief'. However, he didn't have the nerve to ignore the official title in front of Miyuki.

"Former chairman Hattori said it was fine for him not to take part in today's briefing. Since all we're doing is gathering information. Doesn't all he need to do is use the resulting data"

Perhaps, he couldn't ignore his uneasiness with speaking in a formal manner; Mikihiko carelessly lapsed into an informal friendly manner.

"It's about time to get to the essentials"

Perhaps, Tatsuya also found that easier, he immediately matched that mode of speaking.

"Okay. So, please look over here"

Although, his tone was friendly, this was the way he always spoke to Miyuki.

"This is the site, the New International Convention Center"

"That's pretty much in the outskirts of the city"

Looking at the map, Izumi stated her opinion undiffidently.

"It seems like there's a strong feeling in the area about not wanting to have conventions in the middle of the city"

After answering Izumi's question while smiling ironically, Mikihiko's face stiffened.

"Unlike last year, the volume of traffic in the area is not that much. So it can be seen that there aren't too many places where criminals, subversives and the like can ambush us. However, because the area is so rural, it is extremely easy to conceal the preparations to do so"

Mikihiko temporarily enlarged the vicinity of the convention center before, replacing it with the map of the entire city of Kyoto.

"And, even if there is not a close hiding place; I also believe that there are potential locations that can be converted to a base not too far away"

As had been arranged beforehand, Miyuki broke in during the pause in the conversation.

"In short, it is your opinion, Yoshida kun, that a much wider area than the vicinity of the site should be investigated?"

"Yes. No way do we want a repeat of last year"

Without a moment's delay, Tatsuya let loose the second round of covering fire.

"Agreed. Although we are nothing more than high school students, we still need to do everything we can"

Tatsuya garnered gazes filled with surprise. In any case, Honoka, Izumi and Minami who knew the hidden details turned their eyes toward him without intending to but, right now, it was important that Honoka and Izumi not develop any lingering suspicions about what the people who left were doing.

"So, Mikihiko. who are you going to send on the preliminary investigation?"

"I'll go"

"Is it alright for the Public Morals Chief to be absent from school?"

"I intend to entrust the school to Kitayama of the guard detail. Also I wish Tatsuya to come"

"No problem. It's probably necessary for at least one member of the security team to check over the actual site"

Tatsuya followed up with a nod; Miyuki raised her hand.

"Oniisama, is it alright if I go with you?"

"You, the Student council president"

Tatsuya asked the question without becoming visibly paler. Acting in these kinds of conditions was more of a specialty of Miyuki's.

"I wish to set up an appointment check out the hotel, the cheering squads are staying at personally. I wish to confirm that there is a shelter, they can be evacuated to if the unlikely occurs"

"Miyuki, I can do that"

"Honoka, don't you have transportation, reservations, and individual requests to take care of? I am only overseeing the general operation, I don't have any other specific job"

"Oh, alright….."

A Disappointed Honoka yielded.

Izumi seemed to want to say something as she listened to Miyuki and Honoka's exchange but, Miyuki turned to her before she spoke.

"Izumi chan while I am on my trip to Kyoto, won't you to take my place and run things for me as the Vice President"

"Please, leave it to me. Use me to the fullest"

It goes without saying, Izumi actually wanted to go with Miyuki to Kyoto as well. Having been asked by her esteemed Miyuki herself to be her proxy, she wasn't able to say no. Rather, Izumi was the type of the girl who would be all excited over "Miyuki senpai asked me to do something for her!"

"What's the schedule?"

"It would be a little tight but, how about a 2 day and 1 night trip on the weekend before the Thesis Competition, the 20th to the 21th?"

"It's a good plan, have you already pinned down the accommodations"

"No, I thought we'd decide on that now"

"I see. Minami"

Tatsuya's calling out to Minami was the last of their planned moves.

"Yes"

In spite of explaining this scenario to Minami as well, she was not very surprised. --- She always seemed more composed than suited her age.

"Sorry, but will you make the hotel reservations for me. If you can make it the hotel, we are staying in the day before the Thesis Competition. For four people: me, Miyuki, Mikihiko, and you, Minami"

"Me, as well?"

"Uh, huh. You will help Miyuki over there for me"

Regret passed over Izumi's face in response to Tatsuya's statement. She was probably thinking she wanted to be running around supporting Miyuki herself.

However, she had already accepted the job of being Miyuki's stand in. If Tatsuya had been the one who had asked her, Izumi would probably have easily withdrawn her previous agreement. However, it was impossible for Izumi to even think of abandoning a task Miyuki had asked her to do.

It was time for the school gates to close, Tatsuya was slightly ahead Honoka whom he was escorting in leaving the student council room. They were going to where Shizuku who was guarding Azusa who was directing the construction of the presentation device was.

Along the way, they linked up with Mikihiko who was done with locking up Public Morals headquarters and the three went to the experiment building.

Aside from the work Isori was overseeing the auditorium, Azusa was making a console CAD that would compare the experiment's effects.

"Shizuku!"

Honoka called out to Shizuku. For some reason, Chikura Tomoko and Sayaka who were on Azusa's security detail with Shizuku and Kirihara who was supposed to be guarding Carey, all turned to look at Tatsuya.

"Shiba, what's up? We should have put in the requests to work overtime"

As expected, Kirihara had already stopped calling him "Shiba Ani". Tatsuya was "Shiba" and Miyuki was President. It could be called the most proper way of addressing them.

"Certainly, the overtime requests were accepted but, it's still bad for female students to stay late into the night at school"

"....but"

Kirihara notified Sayaka that they were leaving soon with a glance backward. Apparently, Sayaka felt the need to be willful about it.

"What's up?"

As the mood was on the verge of turning uncomfortable, Shizuku asked Honoka that. She probably intended to switch the topic of conversation since she could read the mood but, Tatsuya and Mikihiko had a different matter to discuss with Shizuku.

"Kitayama san, I want to ask you a little favor"

"Ask me?"

Mikihiko broached the matter while fighting the urge to snicker at the classically exaggerated puppet like head tilt she made.

"As it happens, we discussed going to Kyoto and for a look around before the Thesis Competition"

"To prepare for something like last year?"

When Shizuku heard the words "Look around", she grasped the unstated reason.

"Right. For two days, we intend to check out various matters on a 2 day 1 night stay starting the 21st. Will you act as Public Morals Chief for me for those 2 days"

For some reason, Shizuku looked toward Honoka instead of the bowing Mikihiko.

"What about you, Honoka?"

"eh, I'm….staying here?"

"Hmmmm……."

Shizuku's focus switched to Tatsuya.

"Are you going, Tatsuya san?"

"Uh, huh"

Shizuku thought about it for a moment then, said "Okay" to Mikihiko.

"Thank you. That's a relief"

"Your welcome"

As she spoke, her eyes were not looking toward the still bowing Mikihiko but toward Honoka who was avoiding looking at Tatsuya.

◊ ◊ ◊

Inside the cabinet on the way home, Tatsuya was reading web news articles when his face changed to a "Say what?" type of expression.

“Oniisama, is something wrong?”

Miyuki who was sitting next to him noticed immediately and questioned him.

“Ah, this news”

Tatsuya turned the information terminal toward Miyuki. A local Kyoto news article was displayed there. It seems like Tatsuya had already started collecting information.

The article contained a full report on the body of a murdered man discovered at a famous sightseeing spot.

“It was discovered this morning, the victim’s Nakura Sanburo san…...Oniisama, this person!?”

Miyuki also readily understood the reason for Tatsuya’s reaction.

“Someone you know?”

That was a natural question, Minami did not recognize the name.

“If it is not somebody with the same name, this is the magician that serves as Saegusa Mayumi’s bodyguard”

Minami’s eyes widened.

“It is the same gentleman, right?”

“I don’t know, there isn’t a picture”

Although that is what he said but, Tatsuya intuitively believed that this victim was the elderly magician that was Mayumi’s guard.

“If it is the same gentleman…...could it be a coincidence?”

The question, Miyuki voiced was the same one that Tatsuya and Minami were grappling with.

A magician of the Saegusa Clan was killed in Kyoto where it was likely Zhou Gongjin was in hiding. Additionally, his body indicated the death had been violent.

Normally, it would be unthinkable to write the condition of the body in an article; perhaps, it was because it was the result of magic combat.

A magician who was likely an extra yet skilled enough to be entrusted with guarding the eldest daughter of the Saegusa clan had been killed in magic combat. Even skills to that extent could be overcome. Like by that man who deeply wounded Kuroba Mitsugu and break thru the Kuroba Execution squad's perimeter and escape….

There was no way Tatsuya could consider this a coincidence.

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The one who was most surprised to see the news that Nakura had been killed was unmistakably her.

"Otousama, please explain this!"

Having been informed that Kouichi had returned home, Mayumi went into his study uninvited.

"Nakura san has been killed, what does this mean!?"

Both hands gesturing wildly in front of the grandiose desk, she pressed Kouichi who sat beyond it for answers.

"How do you know Nakura was killed?"

"There was a call from the police asking about his background!"

"You took it? What about school"

"They couldn't contact Otousama or my Oniisamas so, they moved on to me!"

"Dolts…...what were you doing"

Kouichi let out a reproachful murmur at his sons' mistakes while ignoring his own. Listening to this, Mayumi became even more incensed.

"That kind of thing doesn't matter!"

Her father and the elder of her brothers' disappearances and the younger of her brothers' pretending that he wasn't home were normal occurrences and as far as she was concerned completely trivial.

"Enough, please stop dodging! They said Nakura san killed, what does that mean!?"

"It means what it says, right? Nakura was killed. A good man has died"

"That isn't what I'm asking! Why was Nakura san killed in Kyoto!?"

"There's no reason for you to know"

Kouichi coldly rebuffed his daughter. However, Mayumi did not flinch from something of this degree, she was not a weak Ojousama.

"Nakura san is my bodyguard. I should meet the qualifications of knowing"

The tone had become subdued but, deep within fierier emotions swirled. One probably did not have to be Kouichi to know that. Since he knew his daughter's character, he was aware some degree of compromise was necessary.

"Nakura was dispatched to Kyoto to do certain work. He probably got entangled in some trouble there"

"Certain work? What was that"

"An important task for the Saegusa clan of the Ten Master Clans"

"I got that! What was the task!?"

"You don't need to know"

However, Kouichi would not acknowledge a need for a greater degree of compromise than that.

That was communicated to Mayumi as well. She realized questioning him even further was futile.

".....understood. Excuse me"

Feeling a great deal of mistrust for her father, Mayumi left the study.

However, Mayumi had not given up on her quest for the truth.

To tell the truth, Mayumi and Nakura hadn't really been that friendly. Nakura's manner was normally courteous to Mayumi and always that of a servant. Mayumi hadn't known him well, he had made her feel uneasy.

Even so, for a non-short period of time, he was someone she had known that had accompanied her in her movements and had been killed. Moreover, he had died due to a task set by her own father.

Mayumi completely disbelieved her father's words, "He probably got entangled in some trouble there". She was convinced that he had not been dragged into something while he was working but rather he was killed because he was working.

However, that was nothing more than Mayumi's intuition, just now she had nothing to base it on. She acknowledged that herself.

"What's up, Mayumi. You have been breathing out sighs for some time now. Besides, you seem somewhat dispirited. Is something wrong?

"eh? No, Mari. It's nothing"

"It doesn't look like nothing but…...if it is really nothing then put it out of your mind. You've been thinking about it for a while now"

"Oh, I have!?"

Flustered, Mayumi sat up straight and fixed her gaping collar and straightened the cuffs of her sleeves.

They were at the Magic University's cafe, it was the time between the morning and afternoon lectures also known as lunchtime. It was a period of time when a lot of students gathered together after finishing their meals, this was not a time when the sight of the honored daughter of the Saegusa Clan of the Ten Master Clans appearing somewhat listless would go unnoticed.

By the way, Mari being here did not mean she was skipping out on her Defense College educational regime. There were special military skills research classes at the Magic University---to put it simply, there were classes to educate magicians to be officers---under this system the Defense College would send over a chosen student once a week to take part in the lectures with those accepted into the lecture course. Mari had been chosen and today was the day of the lecture.

Mayumi temporarily looked as if nothing was wrong but she couldn't keep it up for long. Probably because she felt secure in front of a friend she hadn't seen in a while. Mayumi forcibly stopped herself when she realized she was sighing deeply again.

“Mari, there’s something I want to consult you about”

Mayumi put both elbows on the table and concealed her mouth with her hands as she spoke to Mari. It was an ill-mannered pose but it was the easiest way to prevent her lips from being read. It was allowed to use a soundproofing field in the cafe but, magic that obstructed the light because you didn’t want to be seen wasn’t permitted.

“What is it?”

Mari made the same pose. The poses deepened the impression that they were discussing secrets to the spectators.

“Mari, do you remember Nakura san?”

“That’s your bodyguard, right? What about him”

“He was killed”

“Killed, you say, oh no...when?”

Mari had been about to ask ‘how can speak about it looking so calm?” but, she looked into Mayumi’s eyes and saw the grief and anger swirling together in them and changed her question as she spoke.

“The day before yesterday, perhaps in the middle of the night. The Kyoto police contacted me yesterday”

“Kyoto? So it wasn’t someone aiming for you?”

“Uh, huh”

“I see…..”

Mari somehow stopped herself from letting out a sigh of relief without thinking. She was feigning calm but deep in her heart she was wavering at one step away from panic. If someone was gunning for Mayumi, what could she do...the thought whirled. Knowing that for now, it was an absurd fear allowed Mari to grieve for the deceased.

“It’s unfortunate….you have my condolences”

“Thank you”

A solemn air flowed between the pair. In these wordless moments, they were probably offering up silent prayers for the deceased.

“So, what was the cause of death? Was it an accident?”

“Murder”

Mari already expected that answer. For someone employed as a bodyguard by the Ten Master Clans that was a normal risk.

“But, I don’t know the reason”

Before her eyes, her friend was using all her strength to bear the weighty emotions that were bursting out. Even before she was asked that by Mari, one did not eyes to see that.

“Father won’t tell me anything more than he sent him to Kyoto on business. What business, what kind of job, everything is unclear. At any rate, I’m sure it was some kind of shady job but even so why did he lose his life….”

A sound of something being swallowed could be heard from Mayumi’s throat. Unmistakably, it was a fit of crying.

“It’s not that I want to avenge him or something”

Mayumi somehow quieted her emotions and with that calm, she continued to talk with a voice that showed her strong will.

“It’s nothing like that but somehow I can’t just let it go. I feel that it’s something I shouldn’t leave it as it is”

“What…..do you have some basis for your thinking?”

While she was overwhelmed by Mayumi’s determination, Mari made a rational point.

“Right now, nothing. This is nothing more than my intuition. But, I can’t ignore it. I can’t help feeling anxious”

“I…..still don’t have much unoccupied time”

The Magic University and the Defense College were not all that far apart---to be exact, the Magic University and the special tactics research department annex were not that far apart. Also, since the secrets and inherent magics of magic students had to be concealed, student housing had to be in approved dormitories; it wasn’t that hard for them to meet.

However, as Mari implied, there was no freedom in the Defense College's curriculum as there was in Magic University's. It could be said with the multiple required courses, a first year student didn't have room in their life to do anything else. As much as Mari wished that she could help her friend with her worries that was impossible with her schedule.

".....how about consulting with Juumonji or Tatsuya kun?"

Unexpectedly---she offered up a name, Mayumi hadn't thought of, her eyes widened and she blinked rapidly, many times.

"I can understand Juumonji kun but….. why Tatsuya kun?

"Isn't this year's Thesis Competition in Kyoto?"

Mayumi sensed that Mari wasn't really answering a question with a question.

"The Competition is at most a two day one night stay, right? Besides he'll be busy, he wouldn't have the free time to do anything else, right?"

"That stuff happened just last year. Wouldn't they do their own investigation of the area?"

"Yes, they might do that. But, Tatsuya kun would probably be helping with the presentation's preparations and there's also the student council work. When he's so busy, to expressly ask him to meet with me…….what?"

Mayumi became aware that Mari was looking at her with a stunned look.

"We have this and that to do as well. Wouldn't it be fine to just ask him?"

Overwhelmed by the common sense, Mayumi couldn't come up with even the fragment of a rebuttal.

"Anyway, why have you only been worried about his situation? Isn't the first thing to do to get Juumonji kun's cooperation? Juumonji is already a college student so isn't he more likely to be accommodating than Tatsuya kun the high school student and as for which would be more reliable, I think for sure that it would be Juumonji kun"

"Th-that's…..we're both members of the Ten Master Clans, I don't want the problems of the Saegusa Clan to cause trouble for the Juumonji Clan"

Mari didn't hear Mayumi's excuse. She was able to hear the sound but, her mind completely ignored it.

“Mayumi, I don’t believe it but”

“Wh-what?”

Mari’s expression was not the mischievous smile one would wear when teasing a good friend, her face was subtly serious showing her earnest and genuine concern for Mayumi.

“You couldn’t possibly be genuinely in love with him?”

It took some time for Mari’s words to penetrate Mayumi’s consciousness.

“By him….Tatsuya kun!?”

“Idiot, you’re too loud!”

Since Mayumi had put up a soundproof field, her words didn't leak out but, Mari's look was so menacing it made her forget that.

"That's impossible! Right, impossible! Seriously, me be in lo-lo-lo….."

Mari fixated cool eyes on her mumbling friend.

"Mayumi, if you could see yourself now would you really be able to declare it's impossible?"

"That is….."

Mayumi's voice trailed off from lack of confidence.

However, she didn't end it there. Resolutely, she looked up and puffed out her chest.

"No, that is really impossible. What's impossible is impossible"

"....you're awfully confident but, your statements really lack persuasive power……"

"Tatsuya kun is a reliable boy. Like a little brother. Right, a little brother. A little brother!"

"No, isn't that wrong? After all, you and him are not blood related, right?"

"Yes, It's an elder sister's right to be helped by her little brother! Alright, I'll get Tatsuya to help me dig for the truth. First, I'll check the train schedule for going to Tokyo"

"No, you should…."

Faced with the strangely confused Mayumi, Mari plopped down with an exhausted look.

◊ ◊ ◊

October,14th Sunday. Tatsuya visited the Yokohama branch office of the Magic Association.

Tatsuya informed the reception desk of his name and told them that he had an appointment.

He was already waiting in the interview room.

“Hayama san, it’s been a while since we have spoken. I have not kept you waiting have I?”

“No, you are right on time, Tatsuya dono. Since I was the one who summoned you, it is only natural that I arrived first. Please, do not trouble yourself about it any further”

Tatsuya bowed and stood on the opposite side from Hayama.

As if they had agreed on the timing beforehand, the pair sat down at the same time. The slight firmness of the cushion maintained the feeling of tension that was the impression, Tatsuya harbored on the sofa.

“Your business is a matter to do with the current job?”

Tatsuya set the conversation off.

“Yes. About the attack you incurred a few days in Nara and the rest. You were not injured?”

“I am fine. Miyuki and the others did not receive even the lightest wound. I am thankful for your concern”

“That is good. Well, fellows of that level don’t have much of a chance to slow Tatsuya down. By the way, have you identified those people?”

“I do not know how reliable it is at this point. There’s interference in my access to the military information division, I cannot investigate the details”

“Hoo, the information division”

They were exchanging jabs mixed with truth and lies. Tatsuya was not telling him everything he knew and Hayama was also probably concealing things. No, if it was limited to this conversation, it was more like Hayama hadn’t said anything.

“I am sorry . But for that reason, I have not made enough progress that I am able to give you a report”

“No, no. Both Okusama and myself view securing the cooperation of the Kudou Clan as a major accomplishment in itself”

Tatsuya observed Hayama's face as much as he could get away with without being rude. Was the line about Miya being impressed, the truth or mere lip service; it was unfortunate but, the power of Tatsuya's eyes were unable to determine that.

"So, it would be fine for me to assume that my progress toward the current objective is satisfactory"

"It is sufficient"

For now, he had secured freedom of movement; for Tatsuya, that was nothing but good.

"On the Kuroba front, have they acquired any new information?"

"There are no developments there"

The shortest answer possible perhaps to keep from granting Tatsuya any material to make conjectures from. Those distrustful thoughts floated across Tatsuya's mind.

"Well, Tatsuya dono. I will be going now, I will tell Okusama what you said in order to ask her honored opinion"

"huh" That was probably to be expected. There was no way it would end with him only asking about the progress of the investigation.

"Regarding Okusama, shall she hear from me that Tatsuya dono does not require reinforcements"

"Reinforcements, hmm……."

Those words were outside his calculations so Tatsuya could not immediately reply. Maya sending him reinforcements was not something, Tatsuya had even considered.

However, this is a good opportunity, thought Tatsuya. He had actually intended to to someone dispatched from Mikitsugu's area secretly from Maya or Hayama but, taking advantage of a request to Maya for reinforcements was probably the best way to avoid future trouble.

"Hayama san. When the notice of this duty was delivered were Fumiya and his sister directed to purposely overlook a tail?"

Hayama cocked his head with a serious face at Tatsuya's words.

"Really? I gave no such directive but……."

Hayama didn't appear befuddled. However, there had been such a directive that was clear from looking at the resulting situation.

"Ahh, come to think of it, Hanabishi kun struck up a conversation with Fumiya dono about something"

"Hanabishi san, hmm"

A Yotsuba Clan employee of the second rank. A magician that the Yotsuba had headhunted from outside, His magical power was ordinary but he was a former serviceman with extensive combat experience. He was in charge of fine tuning scheduling and providing equipment for illegal operations related to magic requested by the Yotsuba Clan. Another way to put it would be he was the butler that served as the Yotsuba's control tower.

" However, I believe Hanabishi san would not issue such a directive on his own initiative"

"I am sorry. Not even I know more than that"

That was a lie. Maya's trusted retainer would not be unaware of such an important matter as information concerning Tatsuya and Miyuki being leaked. Never mind Tatsuya, Miyuki was a candidate to be the next clan head.

However, he had declared that 'I do not know' which left Tatsuya no way of pressing him further. Tatsuya changed his attack plan.

"I see. Nevertheless, I believe Fumiya was unmistakably followed. Man made Spirits were able to investigate our home and we were attacked in the area in front of the station"

"Something like that…..Tatsuya dono, it's inexcusable. I will listen to Hanabishi kun's explanation"

"No, since what's done is done is does not really matter, however"

"Then?"

"As a matter of fact, underlings of the Traditionalist have been haunting the vicinity of classmates of mine and Miyuki"

“Hmm...that would be worrying for Tatsuya dono and Miyuki sama as well”

“Yes. For now, I have been coping with it through the good will of the Kitayama family and the Kyuuchou temple but can you recommend to Obaue that she lend me a hand”

“I see, freeing oneself from worry is a standard tactic. Miya sama would also wish you to free of hindrances”

“Please. I do not wish to take up more of the Master’s time”

The unspoken implication of that statement was the threat that more of Yakumo’s intervention will be permitted which could cause problems, Hayama should understand that. Tatsuya thought that both the Yotsuba and Yakumo should understand that he wanted this for both their sakes but, he did not state that openly.

“By the way, Tatsuya dono, about Kyuuchou temple”

Hayama abruptly changed the topic, this might be his way of proclaiming that he did not wish to pursue the issue further.

“Recently, you have been engaged in developing new magic at the Kyuuchou temple, Tatsuya dono”

“You are well informed”

The surprise that showed on Tatsuya’s face was not an act. When the heck did they find out, by what means, Tatsuya had absolutely no idea.

“Simple deduction. We have information regarding what is inside the basement of Kyuuchou temple”

“I see, so that was what is called a trick question”

Tatsuya showed an expression of regret but that was an act. He was relieved now that he knew his information concealment hadn’t been penetrated and it was a good time to reveal the development of his new magic anyway. This could be called a good opportunity to do what was known as lobbing a ball to keep a runner on base.

“It is as you have said I have borrowed the basement of the Kyuuchou temple to engage in the creation of a new attack magic”

“Do you mind if I inquire as to what type?”

“Of course not. I have no secrets from Obaue”

Tatsuya's face proclaimed his innocence as he answered Hayama's question with a bold face lie.

"The magic I am in the midst of developing is a close range physical attack spell. I believe you have gone through the report concerning the Brionac used by Angie Sirius of the STARS"

"So you are trying to reproduce the Brionac"

"There are minor differences in the theory but that is the basic concept. The truth is I had a match at First High in April with an opponent on whom Mist Dispersion wouldn't work"

"The Tomitsuka Clan's Range Zero"

"So you are aware of it. I had an epiphany then. As Miyuki's Guardian, I urgently need a repulsion magic for use against opponents on whom 'decomposition' will not work"

Perhaps, Tatsuya's feeling resonated with him, Hayama bowed his head deeply in agreement.

"An excellent endeavour"

"If this magic is perfected, I should probably not only be able to pierce the psion armor of 'Range Zero' but the Juumonji Clan's 'Phalanx'. I think I will be able to unveil it at the next Shougatsu"

For an instant, Hayama sunk into silence with a grave look. But his gentle 'butler's smile' was restored so quickly that one would think that had been an illusion.

"Is the name of the magic been decided, yet"

"It has not been perfected yet, so only a temporary one….."

"If you may"

"When it is completed for unveiling, I intend to give it the name 'Baryon Lance'"

"……how interesting. I will look forward to being able to see it with Miyuki sama at Shougatsu"

As he spoke, Hayama got up.

Tatsuya also felt it was a suitable time.

“So on the matter of guarding our school friends, please take care of it”

“Please perform your duties with dispatch as well, Tatsuya dono”

Tatsuya made a bow to Hayama and left the interview room.

The shaking of hands did not exist between these two.

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October 15th, Monday.

First High was deep in the middle of the tumult of preparing for the Thesis Competition.which covered a different commotion.

The news that the former student council president and the eldest daughter of the Saegusa Clan of the Ten Master Clans, Saegusa Mayumi had requested a meeting with Shiba Tatsuya had captured the interest of the students.

In the midst of the students irresponsibly exchanging rumors, there were many students who were unable to take the news with a calm heart.

Like the former chairman Hattori Gyobu.

Or the student council treasurer Mitsui Honoka.

And Miyuki who was both the student council president and Tatsuya’s sister who felt an indescribable uneasiness as she watched the pair disappear into the reception room.

Afterword

As always, to those who picked up this book, I offer my gratitude from the depths of my heart. To the first timers, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you, and if this is not your first time, I thank you for following this series.

How was the Volume after the long break? I felt slightly fresh and as I played with the keyboard I believed that the length was appropriate. I materialized the kind of

story that I wanted, in order to build some mood. I'm satisfied because I experienced that I could "delve more" into the story.

Contrary to the initial schedule, this Ancient City Insurrection saga is now divided into Volumes 14 and 15, and conceived as the authentic entry into play and full participation of Kudou Minoru, a very important character in this series. Please wait for Volume 15 as the conclusion of this fight against another important player in this story.

In addition, though not originally intended, Volume 14 turned out to be the "Nara chapter" while Volume 15 will be the "Kyoto chapter". Speaking of narrative, I tried that Nara's scenes were as descriptive as possible, but I think it will be harder for me to depict the local landscape in Kyoto, but I'll do my best.

Concerning the side story of the second year 9SC that I mentioned in the afterword of Volume 13, I plan to start it by the end of the year. I apologize in advance if I don't publish it soon or you feel it becomes a hindrance in the story development (SFX: *forehead sweat drop*). I'll do my best here also.

By all means, please enjoy both these books and the Anime collectively. The books are already in the stores and the Anime already in Blue-ray format. However, there are parts in the books not depicted in the Anime. I think enjoying them together is more fun (SFX: LOL).

With that, hope we'll meet again in the next volume, "Ancient City Insurrection Volume 15"

Please look forward to the series even from here on.

(Satou Tsutomu)